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JUNE SEVENTH
1920
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OF THE PACKS
BY
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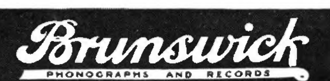
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THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

VOL. LVI. JUNE 7, 1920. No. 4

The Fad Maker's Fortune

By Francis Lynde

Author of "The Perfect Crime," "The Girl, a Horse, and a Dog," Etc.

In journals devoted to literary reviews we have recently seen the assertion that some Middle Westerners are complaining that their section of the country is being slighted by novelists. They say that either New York City or the Far West are the scenes of nearly all the stories of American life. Readers of the POPULAR are not among those who feel slighted, for we have published many a fine story, by Lynde and others, of the great Middle West. This latest of Lynde's is a strong tale of mystery in a city that many readers may recognize, and there is action in plenty, and a dash of romance.

(A Complete Novel)

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE WITH A RED ROOF.

FROM far away at the back of beyond, my uncle Jeffrey Grimsby had been old Middleboro's one best bid for exhibition space in the Hall of the Cranks; though it's a safe bet that during his lifetime the town inventoried him as an exasperating liability rather than as an asset of any sort. Bughouse, miser, curmudgeon, were some of the pet names the Middleboroans gave him; and if these were handed out mostly behind his back it was due to the fact that, coupled up with his other endearing qualities, he owned the Grimsby temper fortified by a bulldog jaw and a punch that had once put Jim Townsend, editor of the Middleboro *Telegram,* in bed for a solid week.

And Townsend's offense had been nothing so mortal, either, you'd say. He had stuck a paragraph in his paper poking a bit of a josh at the womanless house at the head of Pleasant Street—but hold on; the house needs a few turns of the grindstone for itself.

Looking at it from a distance it stacked up as a solid, rock-built, red-tiled château thing perched in the center of a groved lot of maybe an acre. To the building of it no architect, master mason, contracting carpenter, or boss plumber had contributed a single idea or a hand's turn of work; uncle Jeffrey giving it out snappishly that he, himself, was plenty good and able to furnish the brains.

When it was built, the house had a front porch, a sort of hybrid colonial door, and the proper number of front windows. But one summer night after uncle Jeffrey had moved in, a bunch of the town boys and girls out for a lark had taken their courage by the neck and invaded the place. Getting no answer at the door, they had been nervy enough to peek in at the windows. Flooey! that had settled it. In a red-hot rage uncle Jeffrey had torn out door and windows and had walled up the openings, leaving the house with a tile roof stone blind, as you might say, as to its front.

Though, as it turned out, nobody in Middleboro—outside of old Doc Pinchon—knew or suspected it, my uncle Jeffrey had got

the third call from the undertaker's side partner when he sent for me. It was the last day of November, and the month was going out with a whoop and a howl, with a ripping rain and sleet storm rattling upon roof and pavement, and everybody ducking to cover, as I chugged along up Main Street in the little old tin boat that had brought me over from Higglestown. Knowing that there wasn't any shelter for a car at uncle Jeffrey's, I put the Lizzie up in the St. Nicholas garage and hoofed it the rest of the way, reaching the blank-faced mansion in the early twilight.

When I succeeded in making myself heard at the only entrance I could find, the long-lipped, putty-faced old butler let me in and marched me upstairs to the sick room, a big, gloomy cavern of a place papered in dull red and fitted with furniture that might have dated back to the Dark Ages. A high, four-poster bed stood in the center of the room, and the hot-eyed old man at whose bidding I had driven twenty rough miles in the storm was propped among the pillows.

"Hah!" barked a harsh voice from the pillow nest; "so you did come, after all, did you? I told Pinchon I'd bet him an even hour of the time I've got left that you'd never show up!"

"You lose," I said, drawing up a chair and sitting down. While I think of it, perhaps this is as good a place as any to say that there had never been any love lost between my uncle and me; not so that you could notice it. So far as I knew, I was, since my mother's death, his only living blood relation, but he was such a terrific old crank that nobody could get along with him.

"You're a liar!" he rasped; "I didn't lose—I was sharp enough to hedge. I've got another bet up with Pinchon, and that one I'm going to win, either way the cat jumps. Know why I sent for you?"

I shook my head. "Nobody ever knows why you do anything."

"Hah! one reason was because I'm dying, and I've got something to say to you. Got an idea that you're going to be rotten rich when the old crab's gone, haven't you?"

I chuckled; I should have had to, I guess, if he had been dying ten times over. Middleboro gossip had it that he was riotously rich, though nobody knew just where his money came from. But that cut no figure with me. The idea of his leaving his money to anybody who had a shadow of a claim to it would have been an indication of softening of the brain.

"I've never thought anything about it," I said. "What you're meaning to do with your money is the least of my troubles."

"What!" he snorted; "don't care for money?—is that the lie you're trying to make me swallow?"

"You needn't swallow anything you don't want to. And I didn't say I don't care for money: I do—as much as any sane man ought to. But it's my own money I care for—not yours."

"What are you making out o' that little one-horse machine shop your father left you over in Higglestown?"

I named the net earnings for the nine months of the year. Sure enough, they were nothing to be very hilarious about, but the mention of them needn't have provoked the squawk of derision he let out.

"Piker!" he sneered. "With that income they wouldn't let you walk along the sidewalks in New York!"

"Maybe not," I admitted. "But I'm not worrying about that. I have other uses for my shoe leather."

"Saw it off!" was the yelped-out interruption. "You're wasting my time, and I haven't got much of it left. Listen: if you're counting on any ready money from me, forget it. You'll have this house—with a mortgage on it that'll choke you when you see the figure of it. And unless you have more brains than I think you have, you won't have anything else. Past that, maybe you'll have to sell the table silver to pay the undertaker. Get me?"

I got him all right and nodded. Nothing he could have told me about himself or his affairs would have surprised me very much.

"Sure, I'll sell it," I said, meaning the table ware. "What next?"

"Shut up!" he bellowed; "I'm doing the talking! I've had money, and by gad, I've spent it, in my own way. And if these damned arteries of mine had a little more rubber in 'em, I'd pull off a killing that would make all the rest of 'em look like a punched nickel." He drew a long, wheezing breath and then went on: "But I'm out of it—d'ye hear?—out, with every dollar I've got in the world tied up in the make-ready."

"Are you going to will me the make-

ready?" I asked, more to see what he'd say than for any other reason.

"That's exactly what I've done, Jeffy, my boy." He chuckled over it as if it were a good joke. "That's it—I've willed you the make-ready." Then: "Give me a dose of that hell broth in the bottle—no, dammit!—the other bottle; ten drops in half a glass of water."

I measured the dose and he drank it off, choking shudderingly over the final swallow.

"I had the world by the tail, Jeffy," he gurgled hoarsely after the coughing fit had passed. Then, with the cunning of a fighter getting ready to hit below the belt: "Tell me—what's the name of the thing in human nature that's always starvin' hungry and never gets enough?"

I shook my head, wondering if his mental clutch was slipping.

"Nah! you bet you can't—you haven't the brains!" he mocked. "But I can tell you. It's fads."

I shook my head again. "I guess I don't get you," I said.

"Didn't expect you would. But it's the truth. People will do any damn' fool thing you ask—buy anything you've got to sell—if you can only make it a fad."

Stated in that way, the proposition proved itself, and I admitted it.

"All right, then; there you are. Know what I've been doing all these years? Let me tell you, Jeffy—I've been the gay little fad maker for the dear public. Understand?"

"I hear what you say; yes. But that's about all."

"Solid ivory!" he groaned. Then: "By gad, I'll hammer it out in words of one syllable! How do you suppose a fad gets its start—eh? Or hasn't your chuckle-headed, jay-bird brain ever had originality enough to ask the question?"

"Say that it hasn't: what then?"

For a moment he seemed to be falling asleep, and when he pulled himself together again it was with a visible effort.

"They're manufactured—fads are; just like everything else with a profit attachment; see?"

This was certainly original enough to prick a duller curiosity than I had ever owned to. "But now?" I queried.

"Printer's ink," he muttered; "ink and a few brains. Take a sample out of the heap; you open up your newspaper some morning and clap your eye on a space-filler telling you to drink a glass of hot water before breakfast every day. Do you do it?"

"But there's no money in hot water," I pointed out.

"That isn't the point; the main thing is to get the fad idea planted. When you've done that, you can make a fad out of anything, no matter how silly or asinine it looks. And after you've got that far along you can pick your winners; start a demand for something a little out of the ordinary, and then go out quietly and corner the market for that particular thing. Get that through your thick-shelled skull?"

What I thought I got away with was the fact that he had merely been a faker on a grand-larceny scale, and I said something to that effect. After he had cursed me fluently and painstakingly for a minute or so he took up the cudgels in his own defense.

"Nothing like it!" he contradicted angrily. "If you'd take the trouble to think, and had anything in your mechanic brain to think with, you'd remember that none of these fad starters had a dope kick in it. If they didn't help, they wouldn't hurt. As a matter of fact, most of 'em have helped. Your morning hot water washes out the system, and the eat fads carry food values, some more and some less. Once in a while there's been a real scientific discovery in 'em—but nothing like the one I'm not going to live to pull off." He said this last with a groan.

"Tell me about it, if that's what you want to do," I threw in.

"Hah! you're smelling the money at last, are you? Listen, then. Suppose you had all the millions in the world, and yet couldn't eat anything but crackers and milk and bath-mitt buns. Then suppose some fellow'd come along and tell you how you could get back to the years when you could eat lobster salad and Roquefort at midnight, and still sleep like a top. How about that?—some stunt, eh?"

"It listens like a patent medicine," I remarked.

"Not on your tintype: Nature's own remedy. All you can ever do is to make it easy for old Mother Nature, and she'll do the rest—if you haven't burned up the machinery."

Out of my earliest memories I was able to dig a saying of my mother's that uncle

Jeffrey had spoiled a fine dietary chemist to make a dabbler in all sorts of side lines. But I hadn't the remotest idea that he'd been doing anything with the science in his later years.

"You mean that you've discovered a cure-all for tired stomachs?" I said.

"No. Liebig got the first squint at it many years ago, and a dozen other specialists have written about it. But the laboratory product can't be eaten; it's a rank poison in its isolated form. Somebody had to discover a natural food with an excess of this element in it; something that anybody could buy and everybody could eat. I've found it."

By this time it seemed reasonably evident that the old fellow's mind was wandering in one of those hallucinations that are apt to come to the dying. Yet to humor him along I asked what was the name of this wonderful discovery.

He skipped over the question as if he hadn't heard it.

"The fad's started," he mumbled. "The space-writer boys are already playing it up. Two medical associations have had papers on it, and the chances are ten to one that if you went to your own doctor with a bad case of Rockefelleritis, he'd tell you to eat what-you-may-call-'ems. But when you tried to buy the what-you-may-call-'ems you wouldn't find any. 'Cause why? I've got 'em cornered."

He went into his shell again at that and stayed so long that I thought he was going to let it quit right there. So I said: "Well, I'm still listening."

"You'll listen a damn' sight harder before you get through!" he ripped out. "As I say, I've got 'em cornered. It's taken every shinin' dollar I could rake and scrape, and I've borrowed to the sky line besides; but what of the world's visible supply I don't own in fee simple, I've got options on. And the demand's beginning to look up, too. Dealers all over the country are asking for 'em, and wondering where in the devil the stock's all gone to, and why. D'ye get me?"

I humored him again. "It's as clear as mud, so far," I said.

"Right; then we'll go on. Two conditions and you draw the capital prize—and you couldn't bungle it enough, no matter how hard you tried, to keep it from running into the millions."

"Sure, you'd put a drag on it," I told him. "But go ahead—give her the gas. What are the conditions?"

"The first one's easy; all you've got to do is to let the law take its course. I've told you that there isn't any money, and there are mighty few negotiable securities that haven't been hocked to raise money for the make-ready. But there are some property mortgages, and they'll be foreclosed to get the cash. All you've got to promise is that you won't interfere. Let the lawyers squeeze 'em."

He didn't have to make it any plainer. He had a grudge against some of these mortgage-signing people, and he was meaning to reach out after death to satisfy it.

"I should probably have mighty little to say about that part of it," I replied. Then, on the impulse of the moment: "Who is it you're trying to pinch?"

"Didn't say I was trying to pinch anybody, did I?" he flamed out irritably. "All you've got to do is to swear that you'll keep hands off; nothing doing if they come to you to beg for more time. See?"

I didn't promise; I had no notion of becoming the strangling dead hand by proxy.

"What's the other condition?" I asked.

He gave a cackling laugh.

"Here's where I win that hedgin' bet with Pinchon. You'll be owing me something for the millions, Jeffy, and I'll take my pay in advance. You hold up your right hand and swear by whatever God you believe in that no single dollar of the money will ever be spent on—a woman!"

I might have guessed that something of this sort was coming. "Woman hater" is a rather loose term, loosely applied in most cases, but uncle Jeffrey had earned it in so many spiteful ways that his vindictive bitterness was a scandal to respectable, well-behaved old Middleboro. But there was at least one good reason why I couldn't let him pass the succession on to me.

"That settles it," I said. "Here's where we burn the brakes making an emergency stop. Nothing doing."

Whoosh! if I had hit him in the face the effect could hardly have been more startling. He raised himself on one elbow and stuck out his jaw at me like a dog getting ready to bite.

"You'll sit there like a block of wood and tell me that for the sake of the hussies you'll turn your back on more money than you've ever seen, or will see if you live to

be as old as Methusaleh?" he demanded, choking over the words as if they were half strangling him.

"Uh-huh—for the sake of one woman," I told him. "I'm engaged to be married, you see."

"What's her name?" he barked out.

I let him have it straight. "You'd know it well enough if you hadn't clammed yourself off from a full half of the population of the world. It's Eva Locksley."

Say! if I were to write down what that rabid old buccaneer, balancing upon the edge of the grave, turned loose, it sure would scorch the paper. I don't claim to be any so much of a mollycoddle myself, but I'll tell the world it made my flesh creep. That was one thing about uncle Jeffrey: he could cuss in more different keys and with more variations than those old Santa Fe Trail bull whackers that you read about. He certainly could. When he finally climbed down into understandable English again, I got mine good and plenty, and handed out on a hot griddle.

"Not a damn' dollar—not a copper penny!" he yelled, shaking a fist at me. "I've fixed you—I've lost my bet, but you'll pay it in drops of blood! Against the one chance in a thousand that you'd prove to be the biggest fool that ever drew breath, I've fixed things so that you won't inherit a blink, blank, blithering thing but the debts, and, by gad, you'll be paying them to the end of your life! You won't even know where the trap is that I've set for the millions, or the name of the thing I baited it with! Get out of this!" his voice jumped to a scream. "Get out of this, quick, before I throw something at your damned empty head!"

As I turned to make my get-away, the chamber door opened and old Doc Pinchon blew in. There was only a hurried word or so to pass between us—the doc and me. The reaction had set in and the mad old pirate had collapsed; his head was rolling around on the pillow and he was fighting for breath.

CHAPTER II.

SPEAKING OF ANGELS.

As anybody might guess, it was with emotions of assorted sizes that I breasted the storm on the tramp down to old Middleboro's one reminder of the days when the Frenchmen had a line of pioneer posts spotted through from the Great Lakes to the Gulf—the St. Nicholas Hotel, kept by Victor Vignaux, last of the name.

But the prospect of a good dinner served in Vignaux's cozy dining room helped to tone the emotions down a bit; and, besides, almost as soon as the dinner order had been given, here came Bert Oswald, a member of the old boyhood "gang," to take the seat across from mine at the table for two.

"Well—see what the cat brought in!" I said. Then: "You've saved me the trouble of chasing around to your office, Bertie. There's a notice posted on the safety-first board, and it says I may be needing a bright young lawyer."

He grinned and came back joshingly. "Been playing the ponies with some of your creditors' money?"

"Not hardly. Whatever bit of money I'm able to squeeze out of the old shop is too dog-goned hard to come by. I'm not running a foot race with the sheriff—not yet."

"That's comforting. Any prospect that you will be, in the near future?"

"That remains to be seen. It is exactly the point upon which I'd like to have a legal opinion," I shot back. "What do you know about wills and legacies, and such things?"

"Enough to get by with. Why?"

"No question but what a man may will his next of kin all or any part of his leavings, is there?"

"Of course not; his next of kin or anybody else—with certain reservations in favor of a widow's rights and those of the children, if there are any."

"Check," I said. "Now, is there any law by which he can shove his debts along to his heir?"

"Surest thing in the world. All the creditors have the first claim upon the estate. The heir or heirs get what is left after the debts are paid."

"But suppose there isn't anything but debts: could a man will them over to his heir?"

Oswald looked up with a puzzled wrinkle coming and going between his eyes. "I guess I don't understand just what you're driving at, Jeff."

"I'll make it plainer. Supposing a man—whom everybody has been calling a rich man—dies, leaving his estate to his next of kin. Supposing, when it comes to a showdown, that there isn't estate enough to go

around among the creditors. Could the will be so worded that the legatee could be held for the unpaid balances? That's what I want to know."

Oswald frowned again, absently stirring a cup of coffee which he hadn't as yet sugared.

"Speaking offhand, I should say no," he replied. "I've never heard of a case like that. Yet it won't do to be too sure. It's just barely possible that, under some forgotten State law of inheritances, a will might be drawn so that an acceptance of the conditions by the heir would make such a proviso binding. I'd have to read up on it. But, of course, the legatee's remedy would be simple. He could merely refuse to qualify as the dead man's heir, and let it go at that."

Since uncle Jeffrey was still alive, it was quite easy for me to let it go at that. But Oswald had said enough to put a sharp tooth or so into the question that I had asked more in a joking spirit than seriously. What if uncle Jeffrey had really had some grounds for saying that I'd be paying his debts to the end of my natural life? It was ridiculous, of course, but the most ridiculous things may sometimes have teeth in them to bite, even while you're chortling over them.

"I suppose you've run over to spend an evening with the beloved," Oswald said, after the will business had been allowed to slip into the discard.

I let him go on supposing it. I wasn't ready, as yet, to tell him that I had come at uncle Jeffrey's summons.

Assuming that my saying nothing meant yes, Oswald took a liberty which was perfectly all right in a man I'd known ever since we both went barefoot.

"You oughtn't to ask Eva to wait too long, Jeff."

I mumbled something about not making anybody do anything.

"I know," he returned. "But sometimes you have to look at these things as an outsider would—and does. You're twenty-six, and Eva's twenty-two. And you've been engaged for something like a year, haven't you?"

"Uh-huh," I admitted.

"Well; people can't be young but once—and that applies with ten times as much punch to the woman as to the man. And this waiting game is a bit temerarious. It just so happens that I know a fellow who would like mighty well to butt in and elbow you aside."

"Huh! you do, do you? Do I know him?"

"Probably you haven't heard of him—unless Eva has told you about him. He's a New Yorker named Griffin; he met Eva last summer when she was visiting in Cleveland—at the Straffords'."

"Ump!" said I, again. I wasn't going to tell him that this Griffin dickie bird was only a name to me—a name that Eva had mentioned offhand two or three times. Then I added, grumpily enough, I guess: "Nothing doing, Bert. If you know this Griffin insect you may tell him so."

"Of course there's nothing doing; not while Eva's wearing your engagement ring. That says itself. But just the same, Jeffy, you ought to remember that Eva's youth is passing."

"Good Lord!" I blew up, "don't you suppose I *am* remembering it? But how the devil and Tom Walker is a man going to marry on a shoe string in these times? The old shop is breaking a little better than even this year, but there are going to be only a few hundreds to salt down toward the layette, or whatever you call it. Do you think Eva and I haven't figured it over a thousand times? Cut it out, Bert; that's my lame leg!"

He cut it out, like a good fellow—and switched over to something else that was only a little less personal to me, namely, my prospective father-in-law's state and standing in the business world. For a good many years Harvey Locksley had been fighting a losing battle with Big Business. He was a manufacturer of cast-iron drain pipe on a small scale, and the old foundry which had been one of Middleboro's earliest industrial plants was ages out of date.

"What the pipe works needs is more capital," Oswald said, after he had drawn a pretty discouraging picture of the Locksley situation. "I happen to know that the old gentleman has been sailing mighty close to the wind for a number of years, and I can't account for it with the amount of business he does. You'd think there was a leak somewhere, but it isn't visible."

All of which was no news to me. Eva's father was a rather grim old fellow, with a habit of buttoning his coat tightly over his worries; but, of course, his daughter knew more or less about them, and what she knew,

I knew. And one of these knowings was the fact that Harvey Locksley had been wading deeper and deeper in a slough of debt from year to year, trying to catch up with a procession which was always a mile or so ahead of him.

"If he'd only close out the old shop and let it go—that would be the sensible thing," I said. "Then Eva and I could marry, and we'd all settle down on the lower step where we belong."

"Yes; but that wouldn't be Harvey Locksley, Jeff. You know that as well as I do. He'll go on borrowing and fighting to the last gasp. He has been one of Middleboro's solid citizens for so long that it would simply break his heart to have to drop out. When he quits—or is forced to quit—there'll be a funeral."

From this Oswald slipped easily into talk of other things, and if I were more or less absent-minded—as I guess I was—it was because my thoughts were all the time pull-hauling back to that upsetting scene in the gloomy death chamber of the house on the hill. Was it at all believable that my uncle's ravings had a basis of fact? that the scheme he had outlined would actually yield the millions he predicted it would? Having had pretty good training in taking quick shots at things, it made me tired to find myself flopping first on one side of the fence and then on the other; telling myself one minute that the whole thing was only a dying man's gibberings, and the next that there might be something in it, after all. And in the midst of these mental gyrations Old Lady Reason would step in and say, "Calm yourself, Jeffy; dreams or millions, they'll make no difference in *your* young life. Your uncle Jeffrey has said it, and that settles it."

We had spent the better part of an hour at table when Oswald pulled out his watch and pantomimed a man suddenly remembering something temporarily forgotten.

"Great Cat!" he exclaimed, "it's a quarter of eight, and I have a brief to finish before I go home—only reason why I stayed downtown. Come out and have a smoke?"

I rose with him, because I, too, had a thing to do, and we left the dining room together. In the hotel office the old-fashioned clock on the wall over the desk was marking the arrival time of the evening train from the East, and while we were lighting our smokes the St. Nicholas station bus came up with a single guest for the hotel; a big, handsome, prosperous-looking actor man clad in an air of plenty and a fur-lined overcoat. Oswald glanced at me with an impish grin as the newcomer pulled off his gloves and wrote his name in the register.

"Speak of angels and you hear the rustle of their wings," said Bert, with a second edition of the grin. Then, drawing me aside: "That is Mr. Hamish Griffin, of New York and elsewhere; the gentleman who, in other circumstances, would be quite willing to boost father Locksley over the business bumps, so they say. Lamp the metropolitan cut of that overcoat, will you? But I must be toddling. Good night: see you tomorrow?"

And he went his way.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOWY MILLIONS.

The Locksley place, a comfortable two-storied brick, befitting the "solid-citizen" tag that Oswald had applied to father Harvey, was only a short walk from the St. Nicholas, and it was Eva, herself, who opened the door for me. If the one-horse technical school that had given me my mechanical degree had paid a little more attention to the slinging of adjectives, I'd like to rave a few lines, just here, about the dear girl I had been in love with ever since Hector's dog was a pup and chewing slippers. Lacking the pretty words, I'll ask you to imagine the peachiest, brightest, squarest little girl that ever lived, with level, long-lashed brown eyes with depths in them that nobody could ever bottom, with a skin like a baby's, a—oh, what's the use! If the mother of us all—whose name she bore—was one half as fetchingly delicious it's no manner of wonder that father Adam fell for the apple-eating come-on.

"Why, Jeffy, dear!" she said, just like that, when she saw who it was. Then: "My! what a night! Come in out of it, big boy. I hadn't the least idea you were in Middleboro."

"I haven't been here very long," I said, stripping off my overcoat and hanging it upon the usual hall-rack peg. "It's an emergency trip, and I didn't know I was going to make it when I wrote you yesterday. Folks at home?"

"Daddy is. Aunt Muriel has gone to a meeting of the Missionary Society; fancy it!

—in this storm! Daddy's reading in the library. Shall we——"

"Not by a long shot," I bit in. "Let's go and burrow in the den. I'll make a fire, if there isn't one."

"There is one all ready to light," she said and led the way down the hall to the cozy little box that father Harvey called his home office, though he used it chiefly as a place to duck to when company came too thick for him.

We found the wood laid in the fireplace, and after I had stuck a match to it, we pulled up our chairs and hovered over the blaze to keep it warm until it got to burning good. Not to break my news too suddenly, I said, "I wonder how many million dollars you are worth, Eva?"

"I?" she laughed—that kissy little laugh that was all her own; "there are times when, if you could buy me at my own valuation of myself, the weekly stint you allow yourself in the machine shop would be plenty big enough."

"Piffle!" I snorted. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, just because I'm so useless. If I had any 'nip,' as grandmother Locksley used to say, I'd be hustling around and earning my share of the housekeeping fund that we're waiting to see grow."

"You?—what could you do, I'd like to know?"

"That's just it; what can I do? Daddy won't hear to stenography or bookkeeping; he says it would hurt his credit for me to go around looking for a job. And he sniffs when I talk of teaching. Meanwhile, I have a perfectly good college education going to wrack and ruin."

"Shoosh!" I said; "the money-earning part of it is a man's job. But we're getting off the side of the road. You're already worth any number of millions, if you only knew it. I've just refused an offer to sell you for I don't know how many."

"Millions of what?"

"Millions of dollars."

She looked at me with a queer little smile twisting at her pretty lips.

"Who would buy me at any such ridiculous price as that?"

"Suppose we should say it's Mr. Hamish Griffin?"

I don't know what made me let out any such asinine thing as this, because it wasn't at all what I had meant to say. Of course, what I was meaning to do was to tell her about uncle Jeffrey's big bribe. Now that the fool thing was said, and couldn't be taken back, I hoped she'd laugh at it. But she didn't.

"What do you know about Mr. Griffin?" she asked soberly.

It was too late to say that I didn't know anything more than the fact that she had mentioned his name a few times, and that Bert Oswald had said a thing that might or might not be true. So I blundered along and assumed the whole indictment.

"I know that he wants to marry you, and that he'd tell you so in the hollow half of a minute if you were not engaged to me."

"You are not trying to tell me that he has offered to buy you off, are you?" she threw in, with a shadowy return of the gibing smile.

"It's the standing offer that ready money always makes," I evaded. "He is rich, isn't he? And he wouldn't ask you to wait."

If you ask me, I merely wanted her to flare up in a warm little blaze of sweetheart loyalty and deny the whole thing. That's human nature; man-human nature, at any rate. But say! the way she didn't do it gave me a knock. She was leaning over in her chair with her face propped in her cupped palms when she said, as cool as the feel of a nurse's hand on your fevered brow:

"You're jealous about nothing, Jeff—as you've been at other times. And it isn't you, yourself; it's just the miserable lack of money. I've asked myself a thousand times in the past year why we can't be content to begin where our fathers and mothers did: but I suppose we can't."

"No; that's out of the question," I replied, grumpily enough, I guess.

"It seems to be. But when you say that, you open the door and tell sentiment to skip, vanish, run away—that its room is better than its company. Maybe that is the proper present-minute attitude. Perhaps we've outgrown the mid-Victorian notion of the one man for the one woman and the one woman for the one man; left it behind without realizing it."

"That's right—turn it loose," I muttered. I had thought I was merely going to paddle about a bit in the shallows, and here we were, miles deep over our heads—and likely to go deeper.

"Leaving sentiment out of it for the moment," she went on, "supposing we've been letting the thing we call love cut too big a figure, Jeffy. Let's cross it out and see what would happen. You are making enough money out of the shop to enable you to live quite comfy as a bachelor; you could wear good clothes, smoke good cigars instead of those awful things you have in your pocket now, play a game of pool with the boys when you felt like it—indulge in all the little every-day luxuries you're denying yourself."

"And you?" I poked in.

She laughed; a hard little laugh, this time.

"Women have always been the pawns in the great game of life, Jeffy, dear; don't you know that? Our ancestors bartered them serenely; a woman for this or that or the other: the king made peace with his enemy—and gave his daughter in marriage to the enemy's son."

"It's one dead-sure thing that I don't know what you're driving at," I grumbled, maybe with a bit of impatience.

"I suppose the barter woman acquiesced, now and then, willing to choose the lesser of two evils," she commented, much as if she hadn't heard my growl. Then: "I learned something yesterday, Jeff, that fairly changed the color of the sky for me—something about the—about daddy's business."

"Will it bear telling?" I asked.

"To you, yes—because it's your due. You know the struggle daddy has been making for years to put the pipe works on its feet. It has seemed as if it was simply fated to lose money; and it wasn't bad management, either, for daddy does know his trade. It was only yesterday that he told me what was the matter. Ten years ago, when the great building boom was on all over the country, he doubled the size of the plant, as you know. To do it he had to borrow money—a lot of it."

I nodded. "I knew that, too."

"He got the money at the bank—Mr. Mugridge's bank—giving a mortgage on everything he owned; this house and all. He didn't hesitate, because at that time business was so good that he thought he could pay the mortgage off in a few years. But business didn't stay good, and when daddy went to ask for more time at the end of a year—but you know Mr. Mugridge, and you can guess what happened."

"No," I said. "I only know that Mugridge is a shark. What was it?"

"Mr. Mugridge said the bank had been obliged to sell the mortgage and the note; that the matter was no longer in his hands. However, he'd see what could be done. What *was* done was simply a crime! The holder of the mortgage agreed to extend the time, not for a year or a term of years, mind you, but from *month to month*—and at a rate of interest that was perfectly assassinating!"

"But, hold on," I shoved in; "that's usury and punishable under the law."

"Pouf!" she said with a little tilt of her nose, "you know how they get around that, with commissions and bonuses and discounts; it's done every day. For ten years, now, daddy has been carrying that frightful load. It has taken practically everything the pipe works could earn, and he has had to borrow and borrow besides. And in all that time he has never known a minute's peace, with the threat of ruin hanging over him from month to month."

I could easily see how that would be. "And what's the name of this Shylock who has been whittling off the monthly pound of flesh?" I asked.

"Daddy doesn't know. 'A New York dealer in securities,' is all Mr. Mugridge would ever tell him."

"Huh!" said I. "It's an even bet that it's Mugridge, himself, hiding behind a man of straw. He's none too good to do it. How much is the debt?"

"It's simply awful—two hundred thousand dollars."

I made a swift mental inventory of the Locksley possessions; the out-of-date pipe foundry, the home house, and a few odds and ends of lots and cottages in the lower half of the town. A foreclosure and forced sale at current prices would easily wipe them all off the slate, I concluded, and still leave some part of the big debt unpaid. Dimly I began to see why I had been made to listen to all that make-ready talk about shooing off sentiment and bartering women.

"You haven't told me all of it yet, Eva," I said accusingly.

"No," she admitted. "After all these miserable years, daddy has a chance at last. Or maybe it's only a chance of a chance. With capital enough to pay off that horrible debt, and to enlarge the pipe works and install new methods——"

"Wait," I broke in. "Griffin is willing to put up the money?"

"I think he has given daddy to understand that he might."

"Just who is this man, anyhow, Eva?" I asked.

She was silent so long that I made up my mind she didn't really know in any intimate sense. And her answer proved it.

"The Straffords seem to know him pretty well," she said. "I believe they met him last winter in Florida. He is one of the New York Griffins, and I think he has inherited his money."

"Then he isn't in the foundry business?"

"Oh, no; I don't think he is in business of any kind."

"But he would be willing to get in—if it were a family matter?"

She was staring hard at the fire on the hearth. "I'm afraid you've said it, Jeffy."

"Has your father asked you to break with me?"

"Oh, no, no—nothing like that. He has merely asked me to consider whether I'd rather have most of the things a woman is supposed to want—or only a few of them."

In the little pause that crept in I began to wonder—a bit bitterly, I guess—if, in a marrying world, two people had ever been slammed up against a situation anything like Eva's and mine. Within a few hours my uncle Jeffrey had offered me a huge bribe to forswear all women; and here were father Harvey and Mr. Hamish Griffin uniting to bribe the one woman I had refused to forswear.

"It's a laugh for the gods, Eva," I said at the end of the pause. "You've told your half of it: now listen to mine." Thereupon I told her what had brought me over from Higglestown in the howling storm, and all that had taken place in the upper chamber of the house with a red roof.

At first she was just plainly shocked at the news of my uncle's condition, thus proving again that the secret had been carefully kept.

"To think that he is dying!" she exclaimed. "Why, it seems no longer ago than yesterday that I saw him on the streets, as hale and hearty as ever!"

"It is hardening of the arteries, he tells me, and he says it's been coming on for a long time. But what do you think of the story?"

"He is a strange man, and always has been. Do you know what makes him so bitter against women?"

I shook my head. "Not definitely; though I've always supposed it was some sort of a disappointment in early life."

"It was. He wanted to marry my mother—and she preferred daddy. I never dreamed it until the other day, when aunt Muriel told me."

"It's very much like him," I said, "to hate half a world of people just because he couldn't have his own way. But that part of it interests me only academically, as you might say. What I'd like to know is how badly I'm going to be tangled up in this will business."

"You say you've talked it over with Bert Oswald?"

"Just hypothetically. What he tells me amounts to about this: I can take a shot at the shadowy millions by qualifying as my uncle's heir and assuming his obligations; or I can kick out of the whole thing by refusing to qualify, in which case the estate or what there may be left of it, will go to the creditors."

"Which will you do?"

"I wish you'd tell me. I don't even know whether or not to believe uncle Jeffrey's story—about this wonderful thing he says he has discovered; or that other part of it—about his having been fad-maker-in-ordinary to a gullible world."

"But if it should be true!" she breathed.

"Yes; if it should be true, and I could contrive some way of digging out the magic password he refused to give me—but there are too many 'ifs' in the way."

She didn't say anything to that for quite some little while, but when she got around to it she let me see pretty plainly what she'd been studying about.

"If you had all these millions, Jeffy, dear ——" she began; but I didn't let her finish.

"I'd buy you from your father," I said bluntly.

She smiled—to cover up a little shiver, I thought.

"Isn't that a rather dreadful way of putting it?"

"It's exactly what Griffin is proposing to do—if you'll let him."

"But—but you can't spend any of your millions for a—a woman."

"Uncle Jeffrey declared all bets off when he fired me out without giving me the password. If I can beat him to it now, I shall

do as I please with the millions. That's perfectly fair."

What she might have said to this was cut off by a sharp ring at the front-door bell. There was a shuffling of slippered feet in the hall, followed by the snapping of the night latch. The shuffling feet were father Harvey's, and he was opening the door to admit the late hour bell ringer. I didn't need to be told that my guess had come true, and that Mr. Hamish Griffin had found his excuse for facing the stormy night.

Next we heard father Harvey's warm welcoming, and a word or so to tell us that the visit had been expected. Then the voices withdrew into the library.

At this the grouch that I had been alternately nursing and trying to smother came to the front to make me say: "Well, shall I go?"

Eva shook her head. "You needn't hurry; it's early yet. Besides, you haven't told me what you are going to do."

"About this matter of uncle Jeffrey's? I shall stick around until after the funeral, of course. I can't well do less than that."

"But about the will."

"How can I tell, when I don't know what I'm to be let in for?"

She gave me a queer little look. "Isn't there *anything* big enough to make you take a sporting chance, Jeffy?"

I guess this sharp daggering was what I needed.

"I'll show you," I shot out. "As matters stand now, that fellow who has just gone into the library with your father holds all the cards; but just the same, I'll draw to the one little pair I've got."

"And that is——"

"The fact that you're going to help me to realize on uncle Jeffrey's phantom millions; to dig the heart out of his mystery. The job's going to be plenty big enough for two."

"That's better—much better," she said with a little sigh; and after that we spent another half hour, I should guess, speculating over the mystery and trying to find some logical sort of an approach to its solving. And got nowhere, as a matter of course.

As time went on I thought I should have to be the first to go, after all, leaving the field to the Griffin dickie bird. But as the event proved, his endurance wasn't as good as mine. There was a murmur of voices in the hall as if a door had just been opened. Griffin was evidently leaving, and we heard him say: "Oh, no; don't disturb her"—meaning Eva—"I'm here for a week or so and I'll call again to-morrow." Then, as the voices became more distinct: "That reminds me; I knew there was something else I wanted to ask you. You have a queer old codger here in Middleboro named Grimsby. Do you happen to know him?"

We both heard father Harvey say that he had known Jeffrey Grimsby many years.

"Ah," said the other voice. "We know him in New York, too—a little. He dabbles in stocks now and then, and at times tries his hand at promoting something. I understand he is sick. Is that so?"

Father Harvey said he hadn't heard of it, and went on to explain that Jeffrey Grimsby's habits were so crabbedly erratic that it was only by chance that this fellow townsmen ever knew anything at all about him. By his answering in this way I knew that he wasn't aware of my presence in the house. If he had been, he would have been pretty sure to pass the question on to me, as the person most likely to know the answer.

"H'm," said the departing caller, with the accent reflective. Then: "I wish you'd be good enough to find out for me in some way if this report of the old man's illness is true, and if so, how serious the illness is. Just at this time he is a rather heavy borrower in a New York bank in which I am—er—one of the directors, and the collateral committee asked me to look him up in his home town."

Father Harvey promised readily enough, and then the latch clicked for the outgoing guest. Waiting only until the house master had retreated to the library and shut the door, I took my leave, the dear girl going down the hall with me to help me into my overcoat.

"What we heard seems to confirm at least a part of your uncle's story," she whispered at the moment of leave-taking. "About his borrowing, I mean."

"It does," I admitted. But I didn't mention a question which the overheard bit of talk had left a mile or so up in the air; a nagging question that went with me all the way back to the hotel. How was it that Mr. Hamish Griffin had learned—presumably in far-away New York—of uncle Jeffrey's sickness when all knowledge of the fact had been successfully hidden from the gossips of the home town?

CHAPTER IV.

A DEAD MAN'S GRIP.

I never saw my uncle alive again. Soon after breakfast the next morning, the good old doctor stopped at the St. Nicholas to tell me that the candle had guttered down into the socket a little after midnight. Pinchon had been with his patient to the end, and though the sick man had been rational part of the time, there had been no mention of me until just at the last.

"That stiff-necked, bullet-headed, skirt-chasing nephew of mine—damn him; I've got him hooked, Pinchon. He won't let go, and, by gad, neither will the hook! You tell him from me, will you, that I wish him joy of the old crab's leavings."

These were the dying man's last words, as reported by the old doctor, and it was evident to me that Pinchon didn't know what they meant. But I did. My uncle had died in the firm belief that the universal gambling instinct would be strong enough in me to make me accept the will and grab in the dark for the phantom millions; and on the other hand, he was betting that he had covered his tracks so well that I'd never be able to trail the make-ready and so to profit by it.

After the funeral, at which there were plenty of curiosity cats and precious few real mourners, came the reading of the will. This was pulled off in the parlor of the blind-faced house on the hill; and, aside from the servants, who came in for small bequests, there were present only uncle Jeffrey's local lawyer, Heddleston and Bert Oswald and myself.

The document was short, sweet, and very much to the point. After providing rather niggardly remembrances for the servants, the estate, real and personal, was left to me as next of kin, with the single proviso that I should undertake, in good faith and as a debtor in fact, to discharge all obligations outstanding against the testator. And Mugridge's bank was named as administrator.

At the conclusion of the reading, Oswald said his say.

"Let us understand this clearly, Mr. Heddleston. What if the liabilities of the estate prove to be greater than the assets?"

Heddleston looked across at us over his spectacles as if he pitied our infirmities.

"You have heard the instrument, and its language is perfectly clear," he rasped. "Your client—I assume that Mr. Burrell *is* your client—must accept the trust as a whole or reject it as a whole. Speaking as attorney for the administrator, I may say that we shall ask the court to require the acceptance of the condition in due and legal form before any settlement of the estate is undertaken."

"Well?" said Oswald, after we had gone back to his office, "what are you going to do about it?"

"I pulled a long breath. "I'm game, Bertie. I'm going to take a long, running jump and chance it."

"I don't know: it looks awfully risky, Jeff. I've been reading up on the law. The condition is within the statutes, in this State. If you accept the will, knowing its terms, you'll be legally bound to carry out its provisions. I don't know what the assets are; nobody will know until the schedules are filed. You'll take your running jump completely in the dark."

"Not altogether," I grinned. "I have uncle Jeffrey's own word for it that the liabilities are bigger than the assets. He told me flat-footed that I'd be paying his debts to the end of my life."

"But, good Lord, man! if that is the case you haven't a leg to stand on! Do you mean to say that in the face of that statement you'll still go ahead and qualify as his heir?"

"You've said it."

Oswald jumped up, stuck his hands into his pockets, and walked to a window. When he came back he spoke as lawyer to client.

"If your uncle had died without leaving a will, the property, by the law of descent, would have come to you as next of kin. If you say the word, we'll take exceptions to the hampering condition and bring suit to have the will set aside."

"No," said I.

"Why not?"

"That wouldn't be playing the game, Bert; you know it wouldn't. I don't owe uncle Jeffrey anything, but I wouldn't rob a dead man of his sporting chance. If I can beat him at his own game, well and good —that's another cat."

He shrugged. "All right. If you won't, you won't. Heddleston will probably have the will probated without delay. Do you want me to represent you?"

"Surest thing you know," I answered; and we left it at that.

Oswald's prophecy about the cutting out of delays was the truest thing that ever happened. Within a week my uncle's will was probated, and I had been called upon to qualify as the principal legatee. That pricked the bubble. As if my signing of the court papers had been the signal they had been waiting for, here came the creditors, pellmell, flocking like crows to a newly planted corn field. New York banks, Cleveland banks, trust companies hither and yon, private money lenders; and in the home town, Mugridge's bank leading the cormorant procession.

"You've certainly pulled the roof down, Jeff," was Oswald's summing up of the situation at the end of a fortnight. "We haven't got all the assets corraled as yet, but we're far enough along to be pretty sure that the debts are going to out-stack them by about a mile. You're in for it, up to your chin."

"What are the assets, mostly?" I asked.

"Real property, here and there, all of it mortgaged to the hilt. Besides this, there are a few securities in the shape of bonds and mortgages held by your uncle, but most of these have been put up as collateral to secure his loans. What in Sam Hill do you suppose the old man was trying to do?"

By Oswald's asking this question it will be seen that I had not yet told him the full story of that grim interview I had had with uncle Jeffrey a few hours before his demise—as the newspaper fellows say. I hadn't. More and more the fantastic tale of the fad-making scheme had been shaping itself up for me as a pure blurb, and about the only indication that it wasn't a blurb lay in the uncovering of the mighty and terrifying accumulation of debt. If the old gentleman hadn't been cornering something, what on earth could he have done with the tremendous amount of ready cash he had been raising?

Eva and I had been clinging to this one little straw with the clutch of the drowning. One of the first things I did after uncle Jeffrey's funeral was to buy up copies of all the current magazines, and the little girl and I had been spending long, brow-knitting evenings over tables of contents, and searching desperately for the clew that uncle Jeffrey had hinted at—namely some write-up boosting the sale of a remedial food that couldn't be bought in the open market. But thus far we had got nowhere. Everything you were recommended to eat or drink, from hot water before breakfast to apples before going to bed, could be easily had for the price, or no price, and in unlimited quantities—even in Middleboro.

"I'll give you leave to search me," I said, in a sort of no-answer to Oswald's question as to what uncle Jeffrey had been trying to do when he was raising so much money.

"Going back to the few available assets, not already in pawn or realized upon," Oswald went on, taking a list from a pigeonhole of his desk, "there is one cracking big mortgage that hasn't been used as security. If this can be turned into money, it will dig a fine, large hole in the mountain of debts. I've just sent the boy over to the courthouse to get a memorandum of it. I have nothing but the gross amount in this list."

"How much is it?" I queried.

"Two hundred thousand dollars, even."

At the mention of the figure I choked up like a chicken with the pip. In a flash two things surged up out of the near-by past to bash me in the face like jabs from a ring fighter's right and left. One was the promise that my uncle had tried to wring out of me—that I wouldn't interfere with the collection of any debts due him; the other was Eva's mention of the amount of her father's indebtedness to Mugridge's unnamed client, which was also two hundred thousand dollars, even.

While I was still strangling over the nerve-killing possibility, Oswald's office boy blew in and laid a paper on the desk. Through a veil of tears, as you might say, I saw Bert glance at the paper and marked the growing horror in his eyes.

"Good Lord!" he groaned; and then: "Jeff, this certainly puts the cap sheaf on the whole diabolical stack! That mortgage is one given by Harvey Locksley when he built the addition to the pipe works ten years ago!"

I knew it; he didn't have to tell me. And at that instant whatever kinship loyalty I might have been thinking I owed to uncle Jeffrey's memory flipped out like a candle in a gale of wind. For a disappointed man's trumped-up wrong he had cold-bloodedly set this trap for his successful rival, and for ten long years he had been slowly bleeding that rival to death; killing him by financial inches. It was pikestaff plain now why he had flown into that fit of mad-dog rage when I had mentioned the name of the girl I was going to marry.

When I could get my breath I blew up in a few good, old-fashioned skyrockets of language that even the profane old miser himself might have envied.

"That mortgage can't be foreclosed, Oswald—can't and shan't!" I ripped out. "It's been paid twice over, already, in interest and commissions and all the tricky pinchings and pickings and stealings known to the money sharks. You're a lawyer: you've got to find some way of stopping it!"

"It can't be done, Jeff. The obligation is long overdue; it was originally drawn for only one year, and it has been extended from month to month. It is one of the assets and it'll have to be realized upon. The court will have no option in the matter."

"But think of it!" I gasped. "I happen to know about this debt of father Harvey's—Eva told me just a few days ago. That mortgage covers every blessed stick of timber in the old man's woods—the plant, his little property holdings in North Middleboro, his home place. The foreclosure will smash him, and he's too old to come back. The whole transaction is simply a fiendish method of paying off a grudge—a grudge that reaches back nearly a quarter of a century!"

Oswald sat up as one taking fresh notice.

"This is all new to me," he said.

"It was to me, up to a few nights ago. The long and short of it is that back in the other century, when my uncle and father Harvey were both young men, they both wanted the same girl—and father Harvey got her."

"My heavens!" said Bert. "And that is why he turned woman hater and became the banner crank of the Middle West! It listens like a story out of Bertha M. Clay."

"So you see how it is," I went on. "It's spite work, pure and unadulterated. We mustn't let it go through, Bert; we simply must not!"

But at this he shook his head again and sawed me off short.

"As matters stand now it is entirely out of our hands—we can't turn a wheel. The mortgage is long overdue, and in the settlement of the estate it must be either paid off or foreclosure proceedings will be instituted to dispose of the property security. You haven't the money to pay it, have you?"

"You know I haven't."

"Well, neither, we may suppose, has Harvey Locksley. So there you are."

I slumped in my chair. The old hangman's vengeance trap had been sprung, and it was not only going to break father Harvey's neck; it was also going to break Eva's heart right smack in two in the middle. Then, to fill the cup of bitterness to the brim and run it over, came the thought of what Eva had told me about Griffin. Here was an open road out of the snarl for Harvey Locksley if his daughter would consent to pay the price. True, I might play the dog in the manger, and insist upon my rights; if I should, I knew Eva would back me up and let the heartbreaking avalanche come on down and do its worst. But had I any right to permit such a sacrifice—much less to ask it?"

When Oswald chipped in, what he said proved that he had been thinking along the same lines.

"You have a chance to do a mighty fine thing, Jeff, if you have the nerve to shin up to it," he observed thoughtfully. "I wonder if you know what it is?"

I nodded. "I guess I do."

"As I've told you, Mr. Griffin is here with a view to making investments, and——"

"And if I should drop out, one of his investments would be made in the Middleboro Pipe Works," I filled in.

"That's it," he said quietly. "It's up to you, Jeff."

I suppose it can talk loud enough to say itself that I left Oswald's office like a man groping in a dark cellar; a cellar all cluttered up with decaying vegetables, at that. If the grim old avenger who had cooked up all this misery were in any situation where he could look on, he might have seen of the travail of his soul and been satisfied. His spiteful grudge rushing to a climax in Harvey Locksley's ruin; the daughter of the woman he had loved and the man he had hated booked for a life of unhappiness either way the bones might roll; and, last of all, the poor fish he had hooked with the bait of the phantom millions fast caught and wriggling on the barb—it was sure aplenty!

Crossing the square I mooned around the old hotel for the better part of what remained of the afternoon, smoking more cigars than was good for me, and grilling over the infernal mess things had tumbled into until I was mentally dazed and seeing double.

One of the things I had found out from Oswald was that father Harvey would have

at least thirty days in which to get ready for his funeral; that the law couldn't actually set its teeth into him and bite him in less than a month. But what was a month's reprieve when all the dodge holes of escape were blocked?

It was along some little while before dinner time that Griffin breezed in and pulled up a chair next to mine and offered me a gold-banded cigar out of his silver-mounted pocket case. I forgot to say that during the fortnight of suspense father Harvey had made us acquainted; going out of his way to do it, too, as I thought at the time. At the introduction I had been armed at all points, like a hedgehog, determined to bluff the gentleman good and proper as a butt-in who wasn't entitled to anything softer than the back of my hand. But in less than five minutes I had been made to understand what the wise old guy, whoever he was, meant when he wrote it down first it takes two to make a quarrel. Griffin was so man-fashioned and straightforward—so little like the patronizing rich dub that I had been taking him for—that I had been simply forced to climb down and meet him halfway.

"Well," he said, when I had shaken my head at the cigar, telling him that I had already smoked too much, "how goes the feel of the new fortune by this time?"

I don't know just what it was that made me keep up the fiction that I had really come in for a rich plum pudding by the route of my uncle's will—knowing as I did that the whole miserable business would speedily become public property in Middleboro.

"Fine!" I blurbed; and I hoped my face wasn't giving the lie to the word.

"Good! I'm glad to hear you say that, Mr. Burrell. I've been hoping, all along, that the town gossips weren't getting it straight."

"The gossips?" I queried—as if I didn't know only too well what he meant.

"Yes. You know how it is in a village like Middleboro. People stop you on the street corners to tell you all about their neighbors' affairs. The story has been going around that your uncle didn't leave anything but a stack of debts; but probably you've heard it more times than I have."

"Village talk—as you say," I threw in. "Luckily for me, the town gossips don't know it all."

For just one flicker of an eyelash I thought I saw something in the round, clean-shaven Griffin face that made me think of a mask slipping aside. But the next instant I was rawhiding myself for being a suspicious ass.

"That's good; better than good," he cut in heartily. Then, in a burst of the generous frankness that seemed to make him everybody's friend, "It helps out a lot to hear you say that, Burrell. You see, I knew your uncle a little, by reputation, at least, and one of the things I knew about him was the fact that he was a heavy borrower at times, and that gave some little color to the town talk."

"Naturally," I conceded; then I made a small pawn move on my own side of the board, bearing in mind the fact that Eva and I had overheard this frank and generous gentleman admit that he was a director in a New York bank in which uncle Jeffrey was a borrower. "If you know anything at all about my uncle's business, you can beat me, hands down. I believe I saw him only once, to speak to him, in the three years previous to his death."

"Ah—but that once was worth while, wasn't it?" he cut in, with a sort of joshing smile.

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

He gave me the smile again—the same kind.

"All Middleboro knows that he sent for you just before his death. Don't be bashful over your good fortune, Mr. Burrell. Giving the town gossip its full face value—admitting that your uncle apparently left more liabilities than he did assets—your good friends are going to continue hoping that he left you the key to his real strong box. He did, didn't he?"

Having already driven the nail of the lie clear through the plank—by implication, at least—I clinched it.

"You're a good guesser, Mr. Griffin," I said; and just as I said it the dining-room doors were opened, and the little chess game in which I had been playing the part of the conscienceless bluffer was adjourned.

CHAPTER V.

WANTED: A KEY.

"Thirty days—one short little month!" I gritted, pushing back the easy-chair Eva had made me draw up beside her at the reading table, and jumping up to tramp the four strides and a turn which were all that father

Harvey's boxlike cubby-hole den gave room for.

She looked up from the magazine she was skimming.

"A lot of things can happen in a month, Jeffy, dear."

"They can, but they won't," I shot back. "There's only the one way for your dad to break even, little girl. You'd better give me back that ring you're wearing."

"If I thought you really meant that, Jeffy," she said a bit wistfully, I thought, and stopped short.

"I ought to mean it," I grouched, "but I don't. I'm not man enough."

It was the evening of the day when I had had the session of jaw-wagging with Mr. Hamish Griffin in the hotel office, which was the same day in which Oswald had turned me out of his office with a bitter pill in my mouth rolled out of his calm assertion that it was up to me to save the day for the Locksleys. As on other evenings for a solid fortnight, Eva and I had been alternately threshing out the latest developments in the exasperating muddle, and poring over a stack of magazines in a blind search for some mention of a thing we didn't even know the name of.

"If we could only find the tiniest little clew!" came in search-weary tones from behind the shaded reading lamp on the table.

"Yes; but that 'if' is bigger than a Cleveland office building. What with the hundreds of food ads, and the millions of patent-medicine come-ons, it's a fat chance we have! Does your father know yet what he's in for?"

"I'm afraid he does. He went to Cleveland this afternoon, and I am almost sure he has gone once more to try to borrow money."

"He won't get it in Cleveland. His one best bet is right here in Middleboro."

"Mr. Griffin, you mean?"

"Sure. If you'll let Griffin see you just one time with that ring off——"

"You fairly hate Mr. Griffin, don't you, Jeffy?"

"No, I don't; and that isn't the least crazy part of it. By all the signs of the zodiac I ought to hate him, but I don't. The more I see of him, the more I feel as if I were doing the dog-in-the-manger act."

"Nice big doggy!" came from behind the lamp; and then, softly, "Woof, woof!"

That was the way it had been all along. It was only just now and then that I could jar her into taking my part in the horrible mess seriously. True, she had been helping me search for the clew which seemingly didn't exist, but she had steadily refused to be panic-stricken—as I was; had even kept her balance while I was telling her of the wretched discovery of the day—that my uncle had been the real villain who had been sweating the life out of her father for the past ten years. Maybe it was a part of her sunny disposition, but anyway she could always dig up a laugh at times when I wanted to rip things wide open and swear a blue streak.

She let me take two more turns up and down before she looked around the lamp again to say, "Don't you think it is about time for us to try something besides the magazine reading, Jeffy?"

"It's a frost!" I broke out, meaning the search for the write-ups. "Of course, it's blankly unbelievable that uncle Jeffrey didn't leave some tangible clew somewhere—if the whole thing isn't a fairy tale from start to finish. Yet, if the clew isn't in the magazines or the newspapers, where is it?"

"You have had access to your uncle's papers?"

"For a wonder, yes. I didn't suppose Heddleston would allow it, but he did; gave Oswald and me both a free hand. We went over every document with a magnifying glass, as you might say; every memorandum, every scrap of writing. Nothing doing; absolutely nothing. Plenty of records of the money borrowing, but never the faintest hint of what it was borrowed for. And the lenders don't know. Oswald and I met three bank lawyers yesterday; two from Cleveland and one from New York. They didn't know what uncle Jeffrey was borrowing for, or what he did with the money. He was a good customer and had always kept his credit gilt-edged. That was all they knew."

"But think a minute," she interposed. "If your uncle spent a whole fortune buying something, there must be a record of it somewhere—in bills or receipts, or something."

"They are exactly what I was hoping to find among his papers. But they didn't show up."

"You think he had them and destroyed them?"

"It is quite possible. It wouldn't be an inch beyond him."

She was tapping her lips with the blade

of a little silver paper knife, and the brown eyes were looking a mile or so off into some distant heart of things.

"No, Jeffy," she said at the end of the thoughtful pause; "if your uncle ever had such papers, he didn't destroy them."

"Can you prove it?"

"Let's try. He died on the night of the thirtieth, and you were with him late in the afternoon of that day. Up to that time he believed you would accept his conditions, or he partly believed it, anyway. But your acceptance wouldn't have amounted to anything unless you could have the—the vouchers—is that what you call them?—to prove your right to whatever it was that he had been 'cornering.' So you see that the papers must have been in existence up to that time."

"Huh!" said I. "And I've been saying all my life that no woman could be really logical!"

"A woman can be anything she wants to be. But never mind that; let's go on. The next question is, could the papers have been destroyed between the time you talked with him and the time he died?"

I took a minute to think about it.

"Of course, they might have been, but it doesn't seem probable," I decided. "Doc Pinchon was with him; he came in just as I was leaving and stayed until the end. If there had been any burning of papers or anything of that sort he would have told me."

She nodded brightly.

"Therefore, again, Jeffy, dear, the papers are still in existence—somewhere. You've only to look in the right place for them, don't you see?"

"'Only!'" I snorted. "Uncle Jeffrey did business with a dozen banks, or maybe more, scattered all over the country. In any one of them he may have had a private safety box taken under an assumed name. A fine, large chance we'd have of finding the bank, the box, the key to the box, or the name in which it was taken!"

"Oh, of course; if you *will* look at the blue side of it——"

"I'm ashamed of myself!" I confessed. "The thing's got my goat, Eva; that's the long and short of it. I don't know where to stick the pick in first."

"If you had the key to the supposable safety box, could you hope to find the bank and the box itself?"

"Maybe—just maybe. There's about one chance in a million that the trail might be picked up through the builders of safety vaults."

Again she was tapping her lips with the little paper knife.

"A key," she said musingly; "where would one look for a key?"

In sheer desperation I dug out an idea. It was a mighty unhopeful one.

"It might be somewhere in the house: I'll go up and rummage around a bit."

"To-night?"

"One time is as good as another."

Instantly the magazine she had been thumbing was pushed aside.

"Let me go, too, Jeffy!"

If I hesitated it was not because I didn't want her along. Lord! but she was pretty, standing there over the shaded lamp with her face flushed and the light of kindled eagerness dancing in her eyes.

"You'd freeze," I said. "It's a cold night, and the house hasn't been heated since the servants left. Besides, the old place is spooky enough to make your teeth chatter."

"I don't care. I'm not afraid of spooks; and I'll wrap up good and warm."

"All right," I yielded. Then the grim humor of it overtook me when I remembered uncle Jeffrey's frantic fit of rage when I told him the name of the woman I was going to marry. "Maybe you'll take the curse off," I said to Eva. "If you go up there with me, you'll be the first woman to cross the doorsill of the house with a red roof. And, judging from the old woman hater's language when I mentioned your name, you are about the last one he would ever have invited."

"See if I care!" she answered lightly; and then she went to get her wraps.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BLOB OF BRASS.

It was nipping chilly when we left the comfortably heated house in Decatur Street and turned the corner into Pleasant. The December night sky was overcast and there was a threat of snow in the air, and under foot the cement sidewalks were ringing with frost. Since the town was the old part of Middleboro, and the hour nearly ten o'clock, the streets were empty; for that matter, the lights were out in most of the places we passed.

At the head of the main residence street

the house to which we were bound loomed darkly on its hillside. Seen from the street, it had a peculiarly forbidding appearance, with its stone-plugged front windows and door. A breast-high retaining wall supported the lot on the sidewalk line, and through this a short flight of stone steps led up to the walk above. At the bottom of the steep flight there was an iron gate, and when I had seen it last it had been locked with a chain and padlock. But now it stood open.

As we climbed the path among the bare-limbed trees, Eva stuck a fur-sleeved arm through mine. I didn't blame her. The nearest street light was a block off. A gust of winter wind swept through the treetops, and the sound it made was like some dying creature choking and whistling for breath.

"Scared, honey-bunch?" I asked.

She drew a bit closer.

"Don't make me tell a lie, Jeffy, dear."

It was just as we were about to turn the corner of the house to come at the side door that I was given a small start. One of the first of its kind to break away from the pioneer tradition of four square walls and a hip roof, "Grimsby's Folly," as it was called, had many angles and gables, with a ground floor, an upstairs, and a third story—or half-story—tucked away in the triangles of the roof. This third-floor attic had windows in the gables, and at one of these I thought I saw a flash of light.

"Aha!—burglars, eh?" I said to myself; and making a shoe string which might have come untied, but hadn't, the excuse, I stopped and dropped on one knee, keeping an eye meanwhile on the gable window. But the flash, if there had been one, was not repeated, so we went on around to the door.

In the side entrance hall, with the door shut, the utter darkness and the dead air of the closed house were enough to tickle the nerves of a professional ghost-killer—I'll admit it. I could feel my little girl, in spite of her cool, sensible courage that I had seen tested a hundred times, shivering as I groped for the wall switch; and she didn't have so awfully much the best of me at that.

Luckily, the electricity hadn't been cut off when the house was shut up; and after I had found the switch and snapped it, we could at least see where we were. But when you'd said that, you'd said about all of it. One of uncle Jeffrey's cheese-paring economies seemed to have been a niggardly pinching in the house lighting. The bulb hanging in the hall couldn't have been more than a ten-watt, and it served merely to make the shadows more bugbearish.

"What a horribly gloomy place!" came in an awed whisper from my shuddering little side partner. "And the cold; it's deadly, Jeffy!"

It sure was. There is no cold quite like that of a closed house in winter; and this, with the stifling, musty smell that was almost nauseating, made me flicker and weaken.

"What do you say, Cherry Blossom?" I asked; "shall we give it up and come back in daylight?"

Her courage, or persistence, or whatever you like to call it, was better than mine.

"No; now that we are here, let's do what we came to do," she returned; so we went at it—looking for our metaphorical needle in a haystack.

The ground floor, we soon decided, might be easily dismissed. The parlor on the left of the square entrance hall held nothing but the rug and a set of grim horsehair furniture that might have come out of Noah's Ark. The dining room, butler's pantry, and kitchen were even less hopeful. Across what had originally been the front hall—before the door had been walled up—there were a bedroom and a sort of library. The bedroom was dismantled; the bed torn up and the covers put away. It was hardly worth while to look for anything here, though we did open the drawers of the old-fashioned bureau. They were all empty.

The library, also lighted by a ten, or fifteen-watt, unshaded bulb, seemed a bit more promising. For furnishings there were four or five chairs, no two alike, a reading table, and an old secretary. The bookcases, with the shelves looking as if they had been filled from the bankrupt sale of some second-hand shop, were built in.

The old secretary, opening with a leaf that let down to form a writing table, was unlocked. There were pigeonholes, but most of them were empty. Trying to Sherlock the job in a sure-enough sleuthy fashion, we pawed over the contents of the few compartments that held papers; they were advertisements, clippings from newspapers, out-of-date railroad time-tables, give-away diaries and memorandum books—with nothing written in them; all the useless odds and ends that are usually found tucked away

in a slovenly man's desk, but no scrap of writing and no keys.

By this time I guess we were both pretty well on edge, what with the deadly cold, the poor light, and the tomblike gruesomeness of the place. I was tapping, with fingers that were numb and stiff with the chill, around the sides and bottom of the old desk in a search for a possible secret drawer, when the little girl grabbed me as she might have if we had been skating over thin ice and had suddenly cracked through.

"What was that noise?" she chittered.

I hadn't heard any noise, but I promptly took the one precaution that suggested itself; punched a cold thumb on the wall switch controlling the ceiling light. For a long minute—a lifetime, it seemed to me—we stood holding on to each other in the black darkness.

"What did you hear?" I whispered at length.

"I don't know," she breathed back. "It sounded like somebody moving around in the room overhead."

Zowie! Maybe I ought to be ashamed to admit that I had a feeling as if a cold wind were blowing up the back of my neck, but it's a cast-iron fact. Because, you see, the room overhead was the vast and gloomy chamber in which uncle Jeffrey had died.

I was trying to hold my rattling jaw still long enough to tell Eva that she must have been dreaming, when the sound came again, and this time I heard it for myself; a slow shuffling as if somebody were crossing the floor above—somebody trying to walk without making the floor boards creak. Eva's voice, little and thin as that of a two-year-old baby, said in my ear: "You—you're *sure* you saw him buried, aren't you, Jeffy?"

That shuddering, scared little bleat brought me to my senses.

"Don't you worry," I told her. "That's no dead man tramping around up there. If you'll stay here by yourself a minute, I'll soon——"

But oh, no, no—nothing like that; nothing remotely resembling it! If it wasn't a ghost, it was a burglar, and I'd be killed and then she'd never, never forgive herself—*please!*

If you ask me, I'll admit that it was a lot jollier standing there with the old desk for a leaning post and holding her in my arms, than it was to think of butting in on some bold, bad yegg who might get nervous and shoot before I had time to explain that there was a lady downstairs who wasn't used to firearms and might be frightened. So we just clinched and listened; and pretty soon we made out that the muffled footsteps were coming down the stair—not the front stair, but the flight that led to the side hall through which we had entered.

Following pretty closely upon this came the soft and cautious click of a door latch, the thrusting of a key into a lock, and the snap of a bolt. Our burglar, if that's what he was, had not only left us to ourselves; he had taken the precaution to lock us in.

I gave him time—oh, plenty of it!—to get off the lot before I felt for the push button on the wall, found it, and flicked the light switch. It jarred me a bit when nothing happened.

"What's this?" said I. "Something the matter with the wires? And I tried the switch again. It was no good; the current was gone. Luckily, before leaving the Locksley house, I had put father Harvey's flash light in my pocket. By its help we found our way to the side hall, and I began to fit my key to the locked door.

The little girl's voice was a lot steadier when she said, "What are you going to do now, Big Boy?"

"I'm going to take you home *pronto* now, immediately, this minute. You've had enough for any one night."

"I *was* scared—awfully," she admitted. "Maybe it was the cold. I'm heaps warmer now. Let's not be just common, every-day quitters, Jeffy."

"You mean that you're game to go upstairs with me and take another whirl at it?"

"I shall be ashamed to look in the looking-glass to-morrow if I don't."

"Ump," said I, "you needn't ever be ashamed to do that. You'll hunt around a long time before you'll find anything prettier to look at." But since she was game, I took my key out of the lock and we climbed the stair together.

It is no lie to say that I didn't know the inside of that womanless house much better than did Eva, the first woman who had ever stepped foot in it. At the top of the stair we found an awkward box hall, the result of some of uncle Jeffrey's home-made planning, I supposed. Back of it were the servants' bedrooms and two white-tiled baths; and the door to the left opened into the

gloomy cavern papered in dull red where I had had my cursing out.

So far as I could see, nothing had been disturbed in the big room. The four-poster bed stood with its headboard against the wall in the center of the room, just as I remembered it. Unlike the one downstairs, this bed was not torn up; the covers and pillows were in place. There was little other furniture; an old bureau, the counterpart of the one in the downstairs sleeping room, a table, and a few stuffed chairs. For a rich man, uncle Jeffrey had apparently denied himself even the commonest of comforts, to say nothing of the luxuries.

Beside the bed head, with its face flush with the plastering, there was a small steel strong box let into the wall.

"There is one of the miser marks," I said to Eva, pointing to the safe. "As you see, he could lie in bed, open that box, and get at and finger the stuff he lived for."

"Don't!" she protested in a hushed voice. "Whatever he was while he was here, he's dead now."

I took it for granted that the safe hadn't escaped the attentions of the yegg who had made his get-away in the darkness; and when I knelt and turned the handle the proof seemed to show up. The box was unlocked and the door came open at my pull. There was nothing inside.

Eva was looking over my shoulder as I knelt, but not especially at the inside of the empty box. Like most old-fashioned safes, this one had an ornamental iron molding around the front edge, a string of cast-iron rosettes with knobbed centers. She was pointing at one of these cast-iron roses in the row that ran across the top of the safe.

"That middle knob," she said. "It isn't like the others."

She hadn't more than got the words out before the borrowed flash light began to go bad—battery run down. That settled the searching game, or I thought it did. But when I took hold of the bedpost to pull myself to my feet, the room was suddenly flooded with a light so brilliant that it fairly blinded us.

The explanation, when we could recover ourselves enough to look for it, was simple. There were powerful incandescents, whole batteries of them, mounted behind the heavy ceiling cornices, and the controlling switch was on the bedpost just where I had gripped it to help myself up.

"Another of the miser marks," I commented. "Like all the money grubbers, I suppose uncle Jeffrey lived in nightly dread of the porch climbers, and this was his burglar alarm."

In the tremendous flood of light we had a chance to size the room up as a whole and to better purpose. One thing that we hadn't discovered was another electric switch half hidden behind the bed head; a three-wire grid, with the proper wire connections coming out of the wall to the binding posts. This switch was open, and as I threw it in, the two ceiling bulbs overhead sprang alight.

"Now we know why we couldn't get a light in the library," I said. "This switch controls the ordinary house circuits, and our burglar man pulled it on us so he could make his get-away in the dark. Speaking of the canninesses, here's another of them. I'll bet uncle Jeffrey had this switch cut in so he could make sure the servants weren't using unauthorized juice after it was time for them to go to bed."

"But these flood lights?" Eva queried.

"They're on a separate circuit; see?" I pressed the button on the bedpost and the flood lights went out, leaving the two ceiling bulbs still on; another push and the cornice flood jumped in again.

This tinkering and experimenting with the lights tended to shove the spookinesses a bit into the background, and we made another round of the room, looking closely for some hidden panel in the wainscoting or a loose board in floor—some hiding place where the thing or things we were searching for might be stowed away, as well as for some evidence of what the mysterious burglar had been doing. In due course the round brought us back to the little safe. As I was closing its door, Eva suddenly remembered the knob in the molding to which she had been calling my attention when the flash light petered out.

"It's a push button of some sort," she declared, touching it lightly; "see, Jeffy—it moves."

She was right as right. The center rosette had been skillfully cut out of the molding, and a push-button switch, made to imitate it, inserted in its place. With the flood lighting to help, we saw—what we never should have seen with a lesser illumination—that a pair of thread-fine insulated wires led from the movable rosette knob along the top edge of the safe molding, down the side,

along the baseboard, and up beside a window casing to disappear through the ceiling.

Turning off the magnificent lighting scheme lest it be seen from the street by somebody who had failed to observe the customary Middleboro going-to-bed hour, we searched for and found a stair leading to the half story above. Under the rafters there was a floored attic, with one of the three gables boxed off for a room. The door to the boxed-off room was unlocked, and we entered, lighting the way with the failing flash lamp.

As I had more than half surmised it would, the attic room turned out to be a well-equipped laboratory. A workbench, backed by bottle-filled shelves, ran around three sides of the place; and the bench itself was littered with retorts, filters, crucibles, testing scales—all the paraphernalia of an experimental shop.

After we had carefully drawn the window shades and the thick curtains that were made to drop over them, I switched the lights on. Here, again, there was a flood of illumination: two big one-hundred-watt nitrogens that made the laboratory as bright as day. In a far corner we found our two little trail wires coming up through the floor. They were easily traceable to a point over the bench at which they dodged again, this time through the laboratory wall.

Going around into the unfinished part of the half story, we found that we couldn't reach the place where the wires came through. That part of the attic was boarded up and seemingly inclosed one of the house chimneys.

Returning to the laboratory we took another look at the wall through which the wires were threaded. It was of common, tongued-and-grooved sheathing, and rather roughly carpentered. A closer inspection showed that a square section of it was a panel. With the point of my jackknife blade for a pry, I loosened the panel and took it down. Back of it, and built flush with the studding, there was a brick-faced structure with an iron door suggesting a Dutch oven.

"We're coming to something now," I told the little girl, as I opened the iron door. I had guessed that the find would prove to be an assayer's muffle furnace—a part of the laboratory equipment—but it wasn't. Instead, it was a complete electric smelter in miniature, hooded, built in with fire brick and asbestos, and piped off to the house chimney just behind it. And between the two electrodes, lying upon a smooth block of asbestos just where the fusing electric arc would play upon it, there was a small, elongated blob of light-colored brass.

Removing the asbestos block, I pried the little brass casting loose with the blade of my knife, chipping the soft asbestos a bit as I did it. Thereupon a miracle appeared. On the spot which had been covered by the little casting there was the shadowy print of a flat key! At the first glance it looked exactly like the etching upon a lithographer's stone, only there was no etching; the surface of the asbestos was smooth to the touch. It was more like a faint photograph.

"There's the answer to all our digging," I said sourly. "Your guess was right; there is a safety-deposit box, somewhere, and there *was* a key to it. This is what is left of it," and I balanced the bit of brass on my finger.

"But I don't understand!" she gasped.

"It's as simple as twice two. Uncle Jeffrey figured that, when his conditions should be shoved at me, there was a chance that I might not accept, and he made ready for it. If we should rip this brickwork down we would probably find a magnetic throw-switch, coils of heavy wiring, and a transformer by means of which the ordinary house current could be made to operate this electric hot box for a limited period. Plain, so far?"

She nodded.

"All right. Some time after I left him on the evening of November thirtieth, he rolled over in his bed and jabbed his thumb on that rosette push button. Middleboro Light and Power did the rest. With the switch thrown, the furnace would start—and stop automatically after it had burned itself out. We're ditched, good and plenty, peachie girl. The box to which this thing was once a key holds my fortune; and the bank that holds the box may be either in New York or San Francisco, or anywhere you like in between."

That got her. Even her light-hearted cheerfulness and hopefulness couldn't climb over this final spite fence built up by the old miser's devilish ingenuity.

"That dreadful old man!" she said under her breath; and then: "I'm cold, Jeffy—take me home!"

I guess I may say that we retreated in good order. I put the asbestos block back into the furnace, closed the iron door, and put the panel back in place. Wrapping the

little brass casting in a sheet of paper torn from the laboratory scratch pad I stowed it away in my pocket.

"Now we're ready," I said; and we crept out of the chilly old ice box, turning off the lights as we passed from floor to floor.

At the opening of the outer door we found that the threatened snow had begun to fall; had been falling for some little time. On the cement walk, and already more than half obliterated, we saw the tracks of the man who had let himself out of the house while we were cowering in the library. It was with some half-formed idea of reporting the housebreaking to the police that I stooped and by the dim glow of the flushed-out flash lamp, took the measure of one of the footprints with my pocket rule.

I guess the little girl and I were both thinking the same thing as we hurried home through the empty streets; for as I was saying good night to her at her own door, she said: "Wait a minute: how long has it been since we first went up to your uncle's room—after the burglar had gone?"

I made shift to get a squint at the face of my watch by the help of the distant street light.

"It's after eleven now," I said.

"Then we must have been in the house nearly an hour," she went on musingly. Then, suddenly: "It hasn't been snowing for anything like an hour, Jeffy."

"Meaning?" I queried.

"Meaning that the burglar didn't go away when we thought he did. He merely wanted to make us think that he had gone. Who was he, Jeff?—and what was he looking for?"

I shook my head.

"You can search me, honey child—for that, or for anything else you may think you've lost. I'm fed up on mysteries; another mouthful would choke me."

Two minutes later I was back in Pleasant Street, heading for the St. Nicholas, and I'd gone maybe a block or so before I realized that I was following a set of tracks in the light snow. At first I hardly noticed them; I had a heap too much else to worry about. Then a curious thing repeating itself in the print of the right foot began to hypnotize me. It was as if the track maker, toeing out, normally, twisted the right foot inward as he took the next step.

Like a slap in the face it came to me that I had noticed the same peculiarity in the footprint that I had measured as Eva and I were leaving the house of mysteries, and under the next corner street light I knelt in the snow and took another set of measurements. They were identically the same; and now, under the stronger light, I saw that the track maker was wearing rubber heels bearing a well-known manufacturer's trade-mark, and that a small, triangular piece was gone from one corner of the heel on the right shoe.

Two blocks farther on, the tracks, looking as fresh as if they had just been made, turned in at the side entrance of the St. Nicholas. At this late hour the office of the hotel was all but deserted; but in one corner of it, sitting with his feet cocked up on the steam radiator, taking his ease and smoking one of the gold-banded cigars, was Mr. Hamish Griffin.

"Hello, Burrell!" he called, as I came in. "Been taking a walk for your health? Picked a mighty cold night for it, didn't you?"

I don't remember what answer I made as I passed him on my way to the stair. The forgetfulness most likely hinges upon the fact that I had a good, square look at his shoe soles as I went by. The well-known trade-mark was plainly visible on the rubber heels, and a triangular bit of rubber was missing from a corner of the one on the right shoe.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN THE CYCLONE STRUCK.

It was a cold and blustering world that old Middleboro looked out upon at daybreak of the morning following the raid Eva and I, and another, had made, or tried to make, on the blind-faced house at the head of Pleasant Street. More snow had fallen in the latter half of the night, and now the wind was blowing a gale to sweep it through the town like a white dust storm.

Needless to say, I was still puzzling over the latest discovery of the night. What possible object could Griffin, by his own confession an Eastern capitalist and bank director, have in rummaging in the house which had been uncle Jeffrey's, and would now be mine if I'd had the money to pay off the mortgage? The question had no answer that was less than foolish, though it would persist in coupling itself, in a most illogical way, with the bit of talk Eva and I had overheard on the night of uncle Jeffrey's death. Was

Griffin's New York bank one of those likely to be caught short on securities in case the estate failed to pay out? And, if so, had Griffin been searching for some hidden assets in the empty house? Maybe so. That guess was as reasonable as any of the others I made.

Shoving the puzzle aside temporarily, I stopped to take a few lines of thought for my own affairs. Having been away from the shop in Higglestown for better than two weeks, I thought perhaps I'd better drive over and see how things were going. But the fierce weather, or the thought of driving in it, gave me pause, as the actor fellows say, and I compromised on a telephone call to Ruddle, my office man-of-all-work. Everything was moving along smoothly in the shop, so Ruddle said, and I hadn't been missed, excepting on the day when the Cleveland man came to look over the plant.

"What Cleveland man?" I bellowed over the wire.

"Gemmell was the name he gave," came back through the receiver. "Said he was figuring on buying the shop. I supposed he'd seen you, so I showed him around. He had letters of introduction to people here from Mr. Mugridge, of the Middleboro National."

You can bet to win that my breakfast—though it was one of Vignaux's best—didn't taste like much of anything more lively than sawdust after I'd had that shot. As soon as there was any chance of finding him in, I burned the wind hustling around to Oswald's office.

"What the devil is Mugridge sending people over to buy my shop for?" I demanded, butting in upon Oswald while he was opening his mail.

"What?" said Oswald; "has he been doing that?"

"Surest thing you know; some fellow named Gemmell, from Cleveland. I've just been talking with Ruddle over the phone. The man had letters from Mugridge."

My attorney at law was wagging his neat little head slowly.

"That looks bad, Jeff; looks as if they were getting ready to realize on the will condition. Mugridge isn't the man to let anything in the way of debtors' effects get away from him. He'll cinch you to the queen's taste. Have you any working capital in the Higglestown bank?"

"Yes," I admitted; "a couple of thousand or so."

"Can Ruddle sign checks for you?"

"He has done it—under instructions."

"Take the phone and call him up. Tell him to check out that balance, all of it, and send it to you, in cash, by express."

"Cash?—what's the matter with his mailing me a draft?"

"Because a draft could be traced and the payment on it stopped."

Gosh! it was beginning to percolate through my hide, good and plenty, what I had let myself in for in signing those court papers which made me legally my uncle's heir. Somehow, you don't feel the grab—the real grab—of a fool break until the bones begin to crack. I knew Mugridge of old. Twice, while I was only a boy and learning my trade, he had screwed my father in a money vise until the blood ran. And what he had done to the father, he'd do to the son.

Using Oswald's phone, I called Ruddle again and passed the check order on to him. He promised to get action quick, and since it was after nine o'clock, and the Higglestown Machine Works were only a block away from the Higglestown bank, there need be no delay.

In about fifteen minutes the phone rang. Oswald took it, and I heard him say: "Yes; he's here," and then he passed the desk set over to me. As I reached for it I had a feeling in the pit of my stomach as if a baby elephant had stepped on me.

It was Ruddle on the wire. "That you, Mr. Burrell? Say, I did what you told me to, but they wouldn't cash the check for me. Mr. Righter, at the bank, told me to tell you to call him up. . . Yes, I'm in the office at the works; just got back. . . . Yes, Mr. Righter said he'd explain when he heard from you."

"Bad news?" Oswald asked, as I rang off and waited until I could get the long-distance operator again for Righter's number.

"It's going to be," I croaked, and, honest to goodness, I hardly recognized my own voice.

In a minute or so I got the connection and had Righter on the wire. He was a shrewd, careful, country-town banker; my good friend, as he had been my father's.

"About your balance, Jeffrey," buzzed a sympathetic voice over the wire: "I'm

mighty sorry, but we had papers served on us the first thing this morning; an attachment—creditors' claims—something growing out of your uncle's will. I told Sheriff Becker that there must be some mistake, but he insisted that the court order was straight and regular. He hadn't been out of the bank ten minutes when Ruddle came with your check. You see how it is. I'd go to any justifiable length to help you, but we can't afford to buck the law, either of us. You'd better take legal advice at once. I can't help thinking that you've been grossly imposed upon in some way."

When I hung up the receiver and put the telephone set back on Oswald's table my hands were as clammy as two chunks of putty. In all the crazy business, I had never been able to realize that it would probably come to this in the end; that it was morally certain to come to this. I knew now well enough what the next move would be. Even at that very minute some deputy of Sheriff Becker's was probably on the way over from Higglestown to serve attachment papers upon me grabbing the machine works. I was going to be stripped, stark naked!

"Say, Bert," I began, and my voice was more bull-froggish than ever, "I'm about ten thousand parasangs past that point where I yawped something to you about giving a dead man his sporting chance; so far beyond it that I'd hit him on the head with a brick if I had half a show. Is there any way under the sun of busting that will?"

"Not now; not since you've accepted the conditions."

"Then I'm simply a ruined community!"

It was the lawyer part of him that said: "Well, I warned you, didn't I? What's happened in Higglestown?"

I told him what Righter had said, and what I was expecting as soon as a deputy could tool a car over the twenty miles between Higglestown and Middleboro.

"You've got it about right," he agreed. "It's what I suspected was in the wind when you told me that Mugridge had sent a possible buyer to look over your plant. He's counting upon getting a court order to sell you out."

"And he'll get it?"

"Without a shadow of doubt. You have voluntarily assumed your uncle's liabilities, you know."

"Liabilities!" I groaned; "I'm sick of the word! Say, Bert; how much did they tot up to at last accounts?"

"The secured liabilities—those that are covered by collateral, or that can be taken care of by the sale of property assets, run to considerably more than a million. The overplus, which is chiefly in accommodation notes in various banks and trust companies, totals, so far as heard from, something like a hundred and seventy-five or eighty thousand dollars."

"Huh!" said I, "that doesn't mean anything to me; I can't count above ten. Does that round-up take in Harvey Locksley's mortgage?"

"It does not. If the sheriff can sell him out for what his assets are really worth, it would probably let you break about even on the game. I mean you wouldn't be called upon to put up anything out of your private pocket."

Did ever luck, helped along by a vindictive old miser, set such a trap for a couple of babes in the wood in all the history of the world? Father Harvey would be sold out; nothing I could do would prevent that, anyway. And if the price were right—though it probably wouldn't be, under the sheriff's hammer—the smashing of the Middleboro Pipe Works would be the salvation of the Higglestown Machine Works.

"Hell," said I.

"Precisely," Oswald nodded. Then he began harping on the old string. "You might call it a test of your manhood, if you could rise up to it, Jeff. You went into this thing with your eyes open, and so long as the vise didn't nip anybody but yourself, it was your privilege to make the gamble, win or lose. But the way it's shaping up now, everybody stands to lose. You say your uncle told you, in so many words, that he was dying a bankrupt. Why, in the name of common sense, did you consent to qualify as his heir and assume his obligations?"

There it was again. The temptation to tell Oswald the real name of the baited hook I had swallowed grappled me strongly, as it had at other times. It wasn't fair to him as my lawyer to leave him in the dark. Yet some obstinate streak of reticence or grouchiness in me kept my mouth shut, not only about the phantom millions, but also about the mysterious burglar play Mr. Hamish Griffin had made the night before.

"Call it a crazy man's freak and let it go," I said.

"It was just that," he frowned. "But now you have a chance to do a sane thing—a very generous thing. I'm not violating any professional confidence when I tell you that Mr. Griffin has retained me as his attorney in a matter in which I can serve him without doing you or the Locksleys any injustice."

"Everybody knows you're like Cæsar's wife," I said gloomily. "Go on."

"As I told you the other day, Mr. Griffin is here for the purpose of making investments. He is interested in the pipe works."

"And in the daughter of the pipe works," I stuck in.

"And he came to me to find out just what he would have to do to put the industry upon a paying basis again," Oswald went on. "As I've said before, it's up to you, Jeff. You and Eva have been dallying along in a sort of boy-and-girl romance ever since you went to school together; and a year or more ago you tied her up in an engagement. Is it altogether fair on your part to hold her now in these changed circumstances?"

"Well?—if I shouldn't hold her—what then?"

"I think I'm safe in saying that this wretched mess you've gotten into would straighten itself out in a perfectly natural way. Of course, I can't speak authoritatively for Mr. Griffin; I can only say that he seems to be balancing between an investment in the pipe works, and the financing of another industry that Mr. Mugridge is urging him to capitalize. But if you would take the chock from in front of the wheel, I imagine he wouldn't hesitate very long."

"Follow it up," I gritted. "What comes next?"

"Mr. Griffin knows the situation—about the Locksley mortgage; I suppose he has been examining the court records. I am quite confident that he is prepared to buy into the pipe works by paying the mortgage and thus extinguishing the Grimsby claim. If he should do that, there will probably be money enough to liquidate your uncle's unsecured debts without calling upon you to make up a deficiency. In other words, you'd stand a chance of getting out with a whole skin, as I've said, or maybe with a few additional thousands to your credit."

It didn't seem possible that the man I had known all my life, the Bert Oswald who had married David Vallory's blind sister Lucille because his love for her was the biggest thing on earth to him, was advising me in this cold-blooded fashion to break my engagement with Eva Locksley. Yet this was exactly what he was driving at.

"I'm not dead yet," I growled. "Neither am I ready to ask Eva to give me back my ring so that I can hand it to this Griffin person on a silver platter. What I'm needing just now is a lawyer—not a preacher. They've got all my money tied up, and the next thing to go will be the machine works. Is there any rabbit burrow of the law into which I can dodge and save a few of the pieces of the wreck?"

He pursed his lips and scowled thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"They'll have to get personal service on you before they can take your property in a civil action. Higglestown's in the other county, so the service will come from there. You might delay things a bit by disappearing before the sheriff can get here."

"Run away, you mean?"

He nodded. "Gain time, if you've any reason for wishing to gain it. I can let you have a little ready money, if you need it," he offered.

"Thanks," I mumbled; "I've got a dollar or two left."

He pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"I'm going," I said; and did it.

Before I had battled my way through the blizzard across the square to the St. Nicholas I had hatched the beginning of a plan, such as it was. There was no train passing Middleboro in either direction until after noon, so this put a railroad dash out of the question. But my old flivver still stood in the St. Nicholas garage. I knew it would hate like sin to run in the bitter cold weather; but so would I, for that matter.

I didn't waste any time at the hotel, and took no precautions, save to make sure that Mr. Hamish Griffin wasn't lingering around anywhere to mark down my get-away. I had a sort of wild idea that he might try to trace me if he should see me go, though why he should do such a thing wasn't definable in any reasonable terms.

At the desk, when I was paying my bill, the clerk said: "Picking a mighty cold day for your drive back to Higglestown, aren't you, Mr. Burrell?" I hadn't told him that I was going to Higglestown, but since he'd got the notion that I was heading that way, I let him keep it.

"A little cold weather doesn't hurt any-

body," I said; and so, in a manner of speaking, that little nail of misapprehension clinched itself without being hammered on.

Pocketing my hurry tip, the garage man gave me gas and oil, and tanked the radiator with hot water. Luckily, I had the storm curtains; I'd needed them on the drive over, two weeks earlier, in answer to uncle Jeffrey's summons. Running out of the garage, I took the Higglestown road for a starter, so that if anybody saw and recognized the flivver he would be able to corroborate the hotel clerk's story. But at the first right-hand fork I jerked the old boat aside and headed east toward Olinburg, a coal-mining town on the other railroad.

That was one fierce drive! The wind was coming quartering out of the northeast, and while there wasn't much snow falling, there was a world of it drifting; blowing in straight horizontal lines and sifting in through every crack and cranny in the car curtains. The twenty-two miles to Olinburg were all I hoped to make in that direction, but the skidding, bucking little car took four mortal hours to cover that distance. And when I climbed out at the one little tavern in the mining town I lacked little of being frozen.

A good, warm meal, with three cups of scalding hot coffee, changed the feel of things somewhat for the better; and after I had dried out a bit before the red-hot stove in the tavern office, I was ready for the second act in the disappearance tragedy. For the carrying out of my plan, I needed a stock of provisions—eats—and this I had thought to buy in Olinburg. But now that I was on the ground it seemed too risky. The town was so small that such an unusual buy made by a passing autoist would be sure to make talk—and exactly the sort of talk that I didn't want to start. So, after I was warmed and dried, I hit the road again, driving straight on east through the town as if I were heading directly for Pittsburgh or New York.

Now it so happened that I had driven all of the roads in this part of the county in happier days and weather, and knew them decently well. Beyond Olinburg the country was rough and thinly settled; moreover, the drifting snow was washing out the flivver's wheel tracks as fast as they were made. So, a short half mile from the village, I was perfectly safe in turning from the main highway into a side road, and from that into another which presently led me into a back track retracing, on a poor hill road, of the hard-earned twenty-two miles I had already driven.

The early winter dusk was falling when I saw, from the summit of a wind-swept hill, the lights of old Middleboro twinkling in the distance. In all the long, freezing drive the storm had proved my friend, in one respect, at least. I had neither met nor passed a single vehicle on the back-country roads, so my flight was as yet unmarked.

The time had now come to put my hastily formed plan for a drop-out to the test. Good luck was with me to the last. In an outlying field just beyond the Pleasant Street suburb of the town there stood, as I knew, a disused barn, abandoned when the owner of the land had built in a better location on his other eighty. Opening a field gate, I drove through and backed the flivver into the old barn where it would be out of sight from the road. That done, I went to shut the gate, and, as I did so, I noted that the wind and snow had already rubbed out all wheel traces of the trespass.

Confident that my own footprints would also vanish as soon as they were made, I tramped over the hill in the gathering darkness, and in a few minutes was approaching, through its groved acre from the rear, the grim old house standing empty and forbidding at the head of Pleasant Street.

CHAPTER VIII.

A GROUND-HOG CASE.

I've often wondered how anybody would go to work to prove up, in so many words, on the real, simon-pure meaning of the word "courage." I've seen a man face a mad dog in the open street to cover the flight of a bunch of screaming children, and calmly kick the brute to death apparently without turning a hair. A month or so later, all Higglestown was routed out of bed in the dead of night by the yells of that same nervy dog killer who swore he had seen a ghost!

Another time a machinist who was working for me did an absolutely hair-raising stunt on a tall factory chimney to save the life of a steeplejack who was painting the stack; and yet we all knew that the sight of a harmless garden snake wriggling across his path would throw that same death-daring stack climber into conniption fits any day in the week.

When I had picked out the deserted uncle Jeffrey house—which was mine for the moment—as a hiding place, I had figured that the fact that it *was* mine, and was within a few minutes' walk of the Middleboro public square, would offer the best of reasons why nobody would ever think of looking for me there. And in the figuring I had never once thought of any graveyard argument against it.

But now that I was bearing down upon it in the dark, with the howling gale thrashing the bare trees overhead and making noises under the eaves that were like the groans of a thousand souls in torment—well, it was a horse of another color, that's all. But, of course, I couldn't let the gruesomeness stop me. I'd gone miles too far to back out, and it was a cinch that I'd pretty soon freeze to death if I didn't find shelter of some sort somewhere.

So I plugged ahead, gasping for breath; fought my way around to the one door to which I had a key, and stumped in. As on the night before, only more so, the dead inner cold grabbed me the minute I had shut the blizzard out; and before I stopped to think, I was feeling for the wall switch to turn the light on. Then I remembered that this was one of the mustn'ts—that somebody might see the lights—and I let out a teeth-chattering groan. Apart from a good chance of starving and freezing to death in the old rookery, it was on the bills that I'd have to do at least the nighttime half of the starving and freezing in the dark.

It was not until after I had stumbled into the Egyptian blackness of the dining room, and had fallen, cursing like the proverbial fishwife, over a chair, that I remembered that, of course, the house must have some sort of a heating plant; remembered, also, that in our wanderings of the previous night, Eva and I had seen the little hot-air floor gratings in the different rooms. The gratings bespoke a furnace somewhere; a furnace and a cellar to keep it in; so I started out on a game of blind man's buff, groping through the dining room and kitchen end of the house for the stair that should lead me to the basement.

I found it, after I had fallen over every blessed piece of furniture in the two rooms half a dozen times; a steep flight of steps pitching down into the ghostly bowels of things. If a rat had so much as squeaked, I think I should have lost my head and yelled like a madman. But there were no squeaks; at least, none that could be heard above the sobbing and howling of the wind. And, at that, probably the rats were all frozen to death.

When I finally found a cement floor underfoot I decided that I was far enough underground to risk the striking of a match. The tiny flare showed me what I was hoping to see; an electric bulb hanging from the floor timbers overhead; and I reached up and snapped the switch. Like those above stairs, it was only a weak-powered incandescent, but it served to show me a roomy basement, wholly underground; a clutter of ash cans and cast-off house rubbish; a pile of kindling; a coal bin; and, best of all, a noble-sized furnace, with galvanized sheet-metal heating pipes running off in all directions.

If you should ask me, I'd say, at a guess, that it took me just about five minutes to get a roaring fire to going in that furnace. There was little danger of a live chimney being seen, at night and in that furious storm; and the nearest houses, in Pleasant Street, were a good two hundred yards away and down the hill.

With the fire thundering up chimney and the dead chill crowded back into the corners of the cellar, I went over the heating outfit carefully and cut off all the conduits leading upstairs. Since Mr. Hamish Griffin had a pass-key and had made one trip to my house, he might take it into his head to make another; and I had no mind to advertise my presence—to say nothing of providing him with a warm house to rummage in.

This detail attended to, I went up into the cold kitchen and did a bit of rummaging on my own account, lighting matches to do it by. I thought there might be a possible chance that some canned beans or something of the sort might have been left when the servants shut up the house; but, as Bill Shakespeare would say, 'twas but an erring thought. The pantry shelves had been stripped. There wasn't a bread crust, or a box of bath mitts or a can of anything left.

This discovery brought me up standing. With the fire, and a good stock of hard coal that wouldn't make smoke enough to show much even in daytime, the freezing part of my drop-out could be written off the books. But I was no Doctor Tanner to go forty days on a glass of water, now and then, be-

tween what should have been meal times; oh, no. Humped over on an empty box before the open door of the furnace, I went dead against the New Testament rules and took a whaling big lot of thought for the morrow, and what I should eat.

Carefully, not to say prayerfully, I pawed over the possibilities of getting help from the outside. Naturally, Oswald suggested himself first. Could I, dare I, try to get word to him? The answer, after a good deal of wee-wawing back and forth, was no. While he was my lawyer, he was also Hamish Griffin's. Besides, I didn't know where the lawyer code of ethics would come in, or how deep it might dig. Maybe Bert would feel it his duty as an honorable member of the bar, or a member of the honorable bar, not to connive at the hiding of a dodging debtor. At any rate, he might be sore if I should make him a party to the crime by telling him where I could be found. You'll notice that he didn't ask me where I was going when I left him.

There was only one other human string to be pulled, so far as I could see, and the name was Eva. No matter if she should have to marry the Griffin thing as a last resort, she wouldn't stand by and see me starve for the want of something to eat. But how to get in touch with her without letting all Middleboro knew—that was the question.

Just here my good angel came to me and whispered that possibly, barely possibly, my niddering old uncle had afforded himself the modern luxury of a telephone. At first I shooed the angel away, saying that if such were the case, which it was foolishness to imagine, the telephone company had doubtless taken the instrument out after the old man's death. In proof of this, I told the good spirit that Eva and I hadn't seen anything that looked at the least like a telephone in our gropings of the night before.

Still the whispering angel persisted, telling me not to be too lazy to go and look; and, finally, just to be rid of the nagging, I did go and look, lighting matches again as I wandered through the spooky old place with teeth chatterings that I tried to persuade myself were only because of the deadly cold.

And, sure enough, there was a phone, and I found it; under the front stair in a box of a closet that was even colder than the hall it opened out of. Gritting my teeth against the shudderings, I called the well-known number of the Locksley house, knowing full well that by so doing I was giving things away in the central office if the operator there did anything more than to stick the plugs in mechanically. I had my plan all ready to pull the trigger on. If anybody but Eva answered, I'd hang up, quick, and let it go at that.

Happily, I didn't have to pull the trigger. The low, sweet voice that came over the wire was one that I thought I should be able to pick out if it were singing in a heavenly choir a thousand-angel strong.

"Yes, this is three-o-four; Miss Locksley speaking."

"You bet it is!" I gushed, the very sound of her dear voice sending a warm wave rippling all over me.

"O-o-oh, Jeffy!—is that you?"

"It sure is. Are you alone?"

"In the house, you mean? Not quite. Daddy's dining at the hotel with Mr. Griffin, but aunt Muriel's here; only she's up in her room. Where are you?—in Higglestown?"

"What makes you think I'm in Higglestown?"

"Everybody thought you'd gone there: driven over in your car in spite of the awful storm. There was a man here about noon looking for you. He came and asked me if I'd seen you. He was a rough-looking man—a stranger—and he said something that sounded like a choked swear word when I told him I didn't know where you were, if you were not in Higglestown."

"That's all right," I broke in hurriedly. "Now, listen: I can't tell you where I am—not over the wire. But I need help awfully. If—if you'll leave the kitchen door unlocked, and—and sort of listen around in about half an hour——"

"Why, *Jeffy!*" in a shocked voice that renewed the tricklings of heart warmth for me, "wh—hat has happened?"

Of course, I couldn't have told her, over the wire, if I'd had a chance. But just then the girl at the telephone exchange woke up and chipped in with a "Number, please?" and at that I had to saw it off short and hang up to keep from giving myself away.

Back in the cellar I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to seven—the St. Nicholas dinner time; consequently, father Harvey would be safely out of the way for an hour, at least. Buttoning my overcoat, I turned off the light, and two minutes later was battling my way through the storm in search

of some unostentatious back-alley route that would lead me to the Locksley kitchen door.

CHAPTER IX.

A KISS AND A PROMISE.

It was only a few village blocks from the top of Pleasant Street to the Locksley house in Decatur, but with a forty-mile blizzard raging I was just about all in when I hauled myself over the alley fence and made a blind dash for the kitchen porch. Once inside, however, I had a welcome to make me forget all about the fierce weather and the fight I had had. Eva had a fire going in the kitchen range, and—bless her thoughtful little soul!—there was a percolator coffeepot bubbling and sizzling on a hot lid and giving forth fragrances that would have made the pasha of all the cereal drinkers fall from grace.

"Aunt Malvina—where is she?" was my first question; the "aunt" being the Locksley's old colored cook.

"It was her afternoon off. She is over on the North Side, and she telephoned that she couldn't get back in the storm."

"Talk about luck!" I gloated, "it's my middle name to-night. Do you reckon you could feed me a slice of bread and butter, Eva?"

"Can I—why, dear me! haven't you had any dinner?" she cried.

"Not that I can remember at this distant date. I——"

"Not another word: you just put your mind upon getting warm," she commanded; and while I went on trying to thaw myself out, she showed me what a real, up-to-the-minute kitchen efficiency engineer could do in the way of speeding up a meal. Rashers of bacon, browned to a turn, hashed fried potatoes, three eggs broken into the bacon fat, a loaf of aunt Malvina's unapproachable bread, the kitchen table laid for one in about two winks—Lord, I could have fallen down and worshiped that girl! If I ever have a daughter I shall tell her to take a course in kitchen mechanics, and then, some night when her young man is right sharp-set and peckish, she shall take him to the kitchen and let him see her do her little vamp act with the skillets. If that doesn't fetch him, nothing will.

Eva wouldn't let me talk at all until after I had reached the second cup of coffee. Then she got the whole sad, sad story; of the confiscating of my working capital in the Higglestown bank, and of the dead certainty that the machine works would be the next thing to go if the sheriff ever got service upon me with the attachment papers.

"But, Jeffy!" she protested, wide-eyed, "you can't keep on hiding forever—and in that horrible house, too! How did you ever come to think of going there?"

"Two or three reasons; it seemed to be about the only place in sight to which I wouldn't be likely to be traced; and I didn't want to get completely out of touch. But most of all, I wanted to stay within shouting distance of you."

"Yes; but you can't stay there indefinitely —and in this awful weather!"

"It isn't so bad—in the cellar," I told her; "not with the furnace going. And I should say there are at least two full tons of coal in the bin. The eats are what are bothering me most."

She settled that part of it very quickly.

"Could you manage your own cooking if you had to?" she asked.

"I could broil beefsteak in the furnace and boil eggs."

"Then you needn't starve. I do the buying for the house, and I can market for you, too. Only sooner or later somebody will be sure to see you going back and forth to carry the things. I don't see what you can hope to accomplish by hiding away in that horrible old tomb, though."

I debated just a second or so as to whether I'd better tell her the name of the man whose tracks we had seen in the snow the night before, and that I wanted to stick around in the hope of finding out why he had made them. On the whole, I decided I'd better not. If, in the crooked turning and twisting of things which now seemed to have taken our lives in hand, she should be faced with the necessity of marrying this peculiar Mr. Hamish Griffin, the less she knew about any shadinesses he might be up to, the better.

"Maybe I didn't hope to accomplish anything but a swift drop-out," I explained.

For some few minutes she didn't say anything more; she was just thoughtful. When she spoke again I saw that she had been summing up the miseries.

"Things are just about as bad as they can be now, aren't they, Jeffy?" she lamented. "Daddy's going to be smashed, and you'll lose everything you have, and

then some." She was sitting opposite me and had her hands on aunt Malvina's white-scoured kitchen table. I saw that she was looking down at the modest diamond I had bought for her nearly a year before.

"Yes," I said; "that ring slams the door in the face of the only possible antidote for the various poisons."

"Do you want me to take it off, Jeffy?"

What could I say? If I should say yes, it would leave the inference wide open that I valued my trumpery little belongings more than I did her love. And if I didn't say yes, it was equivalent to telling her that her father could go smash and be hanged, or die of disappointment, for all I cared.

"You mustn't put it up to me that way," I broke out. "It's wrong!"

"I wasn't," she denied; "at least I didn't mean to. I was trying to put it up to myself. It gets har-harder every day, big boy"—her eyes were suspiciously bright now. "It's wo-worse than you know—than you thought. I was ashamed to tell you that Mr. Griffin asked me to m-marry him, last summer, at the Strafford's. I don't know whether he hadn't seen the ring, or whether he just ignored it. And here in Middleboro I'm almost certain people have been telling him that it's just a boy-and-girl affair between us—you and me; that it has been going on for years and doesn't me-mean anything."

"Well?" I slipped in.

"When daddy told me, two weeks ago, how things stood with him—that he was likely to lose the pipe works and everything—I said to myself that I had you, Jeffy, and that we two would just buckle down together and work hard and take care of him, and let everything else go. But now——"

"Say it; say it all," I urged. "This Griffin joy bird has been working on you again, hasn't he?"

"He was here this afternoon. He—he is a gentleman, Jeffy; even if you *do* hate him you'll have to concede that much. You might have been behind the door listening to everything he said, and you wouldn't have heard anything that you could take exceptions to. And there was one thing that would have made you ashamed for all the names you've been calling him."

"Try it on me and see if it would."

"Of course, he has heard all about the will and your trouble; everybody in Middleboro knows the whole story by this time. He said there was only one thing that kept him from stepping in to help daddy; he was afraid I might think he was trying to put us—or me—under obligations; and he didn't want me to—he didn't, that is——"

"He didn't want to seem to be forcing your hand on the marriage proposition. Good; bully good! But still and all, *that* doesn't make me ashamed of the name calling."

"Oh, no; that wasn't what I meant," she went on hastily. "It was what he said about you. He said he suspected—in the shape things had gotten into—that you might be—er—that you might be finding yourself in need of ready money, just temporarily. He wanted me to tell you that if a few thousands would help, just now, he'd be——"

I laughed like a fool and wondered if the whole world had gone suddenly dippy. Then a streak of sanity came along and I asked a question.

"At what time in the afternoon was he here?"

"About half past three."

I began to put a couple of speculative twos together to see if they really would make four. By half past three the sheriff's man had made his search for me, and at least some portion of Middleboro had been trying to tell him that I had driven over to Higglestown. He knew better than that, because he had just come over the road and would have met me; and he had probably said as much. That was why he had come to Eva. He thought I'd tell her where I was going, if I hadn't told anybody else.

So, then: Mr. Hamish Griffin probably knew what all the town knew. Was he also trying to find out through Eva where I had gone? Maybe so; but even if the answer to this were yes, it didn't explain why he was anxious to stake me to a few thousands.

I gave it up and looked at my watch. It was well on past eight, and there was a good chance that, the night being so stormy, father Harvey would come home early from the hotel dinner. And he mustn't find a sheriff-dodging tramp in his kitchen.

"I must be getting back," I announced, with a smile-on-the-face-of-the-tiger feeling as I glanced at the empty dishes I was leaving. Then I put a bank note on the table for a little eat ante. "If you'll tack a few things on to your next grocery order," I began to say, but she stopped me.

"I'll do that; but you must take some things with you to-night." And she swiftly filled a basket for me, thereby preparing many surprises for aunt Malvina when she should come back and find her pantry rifled.

The going-away preparations were not made a minute too soon. While the dear girl was tucking the last can of baked beans into the basket and telling me how I was to heat it without having a boiler explosion, there came the slam of a door, a stamping of feet, and voices in the house frontwards. Father Harvey had returned, bringing somebody with him—his late dinner host, for a guess.

I didn't stand upon the order of my going. A snatched kiss, a promise to come again when I should be told that the coast was clear, and I vanished into the storm, taking the back fence in a flying leap, and burbling loverlike over Eva's farewell words, which, after all, were only to the effect that I must run all the way to the top of Pleasant Street hill, else some of the things she had put into the basket would freeze and burst.

The old stone pile in the wooded acre didn't look half so forbidding as I wallowed through the drifts to it for the second time that night. Down in the cellar my good fire was glowing cheerfully; and after I had put the precious basket away, I went upstairs and robbed one of the servants' rooms of a cot, a mattress, and an armful of bedding.

A pipe, lighted after I had carefully closed the door at the head of the cellar stair so that the tobacco smell shouldn't get up into the house, topped off the evening, and when I turned in on the commandeered cot it was not to lie awake and ponder over the events of the strenuous day: nothing like that. I was asleep about as soon as my head hit the pillow.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT THE SIDEWALK DID.

Having made rather heavy weather of it, as you might say, the day before, I slept late on the morning following the raid upon father Harvey's pantry. A peephole scraped through the coating on one of the frosted house windows showed me a world tightly locked in the grip of winter. The snow—there hadn't been so much of it, after all—was heaped into windrows and drifts, and there was plenty of bare ground to be seen; but though the gale had blown itself out and the sun was shining brightly, it was snapping cold; a little thermometer screwed to the outer frame of the window standing at four below zero.

A lonesome breakfast cooked over the furnace fire and eaten, so to speak, by hand, my bed made, and the fire renewed carefully so that it wouldn't make any telltale smoke, I was up against a harder proposition than the storm-fighting experience of the night—all dressed up, with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Sitting on the edge of the cot and grilling over the iridescent tangle things had gotten into didn't help matters, so finally, in sheer despair, I hiked upstairs to the gloomy old library and grabbed off a book at haphazard.

When I got the prize down to the lighted cellar where I could see the title, the grab-off turned out to be a poor-print copy of "Adam Bede." I read it, or read at it, until it was time to cook and eat again; but that settled the novel-reading business for the day. Too much is enough, as a Frenchman would say, and after putting away another lonesome meal, I stretched out on the cot and sawed off another chunk of sleep.

When I awoke the watch told me I had made good—killed a whole afternoon. It was six o'clock and time to get supper. That was encouraging, as far as it went, but by the time I had toasted the third installment of bacon for the day over the furnace coals, and had neatly melted the spout from the coffeepot trying to brew a cup of coffee, I was all in again and ripe for anything. The loss of the machine works, of everything I possessed in the world, seemed feather light in comparison with the prospect of dragging out a bare breathing and eating existence in that dog kennel of a cellar for another twenty-four hours.

Since darkness had come, and the frigid cold seemed to be moderating a little, I closed and locked my dungeon cell and made a break for the open, if for nothing more than to get a mouthful of fresh air. Sitting on the hillside where the gale of the previous night had had a fair sweep at it, a good part of the house-surrounding acre had been blown clean of the snow, so I made shift to get to the street without leaving any tracks. Once on the sidewalk, with coat collar turned up and my hat pulled over my eyes, I was reasonably safe, especially as it was still nipping enough to make the people who were out shrink turtle fashion

into their shells and go heel clicking briskly about their own affairs.

After a walk of a block or two I grew bolder. Several people whom I knew well had passed me without recognition, hurrying along to waiting firesides, I supposed. Farther downtown it was even safer. Though Middleboro wasn't big enough to afford a crowd, there were enough people out to make dodging an easier job.

Rounding the St. Nicholas corner I passed the windows of the dining room slowly. It was the dinner hour, and there was a good sprinkling of diners. Among them I had a glimpse of Oswald sitting at a table for two with Griffin. That didn't spell anything in particular, or I told myself it needn't. Oswalk was Griffin's attorney, as well as mine; and, anyway, there was no law to prevent them from sitting together at table. Yet, as I drifted on out of range, the juxtaposition—if that's the word—of the two sort of rubbed me the wrong way.

Plodding along aimlessly, I suppose I must have put in an hour or more wandering around town, crossing the railroad tracks into the factory district, straggling back through the western suburb, and ending up with a circuit that took me back and forth past the Locksley house a couple of times. With a light in the library and another in the living room, I took it that both father Harvey and his sister were at home wherefore there was no chance for me. So, at the second time of passing I gave up the idea of trying to see Eva and headed for Pleasant Street hill and my dungeon.

It was just as I was turning out of Decatur into Pleasant that a man, closely muffled in a handsome overcoat, brushed past me on his way up the street. The solid stride, the natty, up-to-the-minute soft hat, and the fur-lined coat collar, were unmistakable. I had barely missed being run over, as you might say, by Mr. Hamish Griffin.

They say curiosity killed the cat, but at that, I guess we can all own to a fair share of it—it's what keeps the world turning over on its axle bearings. Instantly I found myself itching with a desire to know where Griffin was heading for at such pace-making speed; and after I'd given him enough of a start so that he wouldn't get wise to the fact that he was being shadowed, I trailed him.

It was easy enough. He made no effort to dodge. Going straight up the street, he turned in at the gate of the blind-faced house as brazenly as if he were going home. And a minute later, from behind one of the big trees on the lawn, I saw him coolly unlock the side door and walk in.

"Good!" says I to myself. "Now, old man Jeff, if this doesn't bring on more talk, it ought to, you'll have to admit."

Waiting until I saw through the slats of the closed Venetians the lights go on in the room where my uncle had died—proof good enough that my uninvited guest had gone upstairs, I let myself in with my own key, closed and locked the door noiselessly, and groped my way to the cellar—happily without stumbling over anything.

In the furnace room, with the stair door shut and the light turned on, I whipped off my shoes, warmed my feet for a minute or so against the furnace shell, and then wrapped them in a couple of old gunnysacks, tearing strips from a bed sheet for strings. Thus equipped, I thought I could gum-shoe with old Vidoq himself, and snapping off the light, I crept upstairs.

Upon reaching the open door to the big chamber and peeking in, I saw the Honorable Hamish on his knees before the little safe at the bed head. Evidently he either didn't know of the flood-lighting scheme, or, knowing of it, was afraid to use it, for only the two dim pendant lights were on, and he was taking his look-in with the help of a powerful pocket electric.

The door of the little safe was open, and he seemed to be thoughtfully sizing up the inside; sounding the walls with his knuckles, lifting the bit of carpet in the bottom of the box to peer and feel around under it, and stooping now and then to put the flash lamp down so that he might breathe upon his bare hands and rub them together, as he needed to in that deadly cold.

Thus far it was plain that he had not yet discovered the rosette-button electric switch in the safe molding; but it was a good bet that he would, sooner or later. He did. Giving up the interior as a bad job, he began to run his fingers along the molding like a skillful musician searching for the lost chord. Presently I saw the flying fingers stop. Then the searchlight was turned, first upon the center rosette, and then along the molding and down to the baseboard. He had found the switch and was tracing the threadlike wires.

This was my warning to get out of his

way, and I ducked into one of the servants' bedrooms. Pretty soon I heard him climbing the stair to the attic, and once more I chased after him. Exactly as Eva and I had done the night before, he found the place in the attic floor where the wires came up, traced them to the laboratory, went inside and lost them, came out again and began to investigate the boxed-up chimney into which they had apparently disappeared. In this he was a lot more thorough than we had been. Producing a neat little burglar's jimmy from some inside pocket of the handsome overcoat, he made short work of the board hoardings.

I couldn't see what the hole he made showed him, but I guessed it would be the electric transformer and switchboard of the little furnace. Whatever he found, he didn't waste any time on it. A minute later he was back in the laboratory, and by the time I had shuffled to the door he had discovered the wooden furnace mask, had taken it down, and was examining the interior of the little hot box with his flash light.

By this time he had me going good and plenty. Did he, too, know of the existence of the key that had been melted down? It surely looked that way. Like the parts of a puzzle picture that had suddenly come alive, some of the queer happenings of the past two weeks began to fit themselves together. Griffin had known of uncle Jeffrey's sickness in advance: did he also know of the make-ready into which my uncle had put his whole fortune? Was he, perhaps, in exactly the same fix that I was in—knowing the bare fact that a huge harvest of profit was ready to be reaped without knowing where the field lay, or just where the man now dead had hidden the reaping machine?

While these queries were buzzing around in my head like a swarm of angry hornets, the banker-director-burglar was carefully removing the block of asbestos from the furnace. Next I saw him poring over its surface with the help of a pocket reading glass. Of course, he saw the fire-photographed print of the key; couldn't help seeing it since Eva and I had seen it plainly enough without a magnifier. But what he did next got me. With a silk handkerchief taken from his pocket he wrapped the asbestos block as carefully as if it had been fragile glass; wrapped it again in a newspaper drawn from another pocket; and stowed the package away somewhere inside of his clothes.

The shutting of the furnace door and the replacing of the wooden panel were signals that the burglary was about over, and that it was time for me to dodge again. I did it successfully, thanks to the gunny-sack overshoes, and was listening at the head of the attic stair when Griffin made his way down the two flights and let himself out of the house. From a gable window in the attic I saw him go down the walk, descend the stone steps to the street, and go swinging away into the night. The act was over and the curtain had been rung down.

For a good hour after Griffin had gone I sat on my cot in the cellar, smoking one pipe after another, and trying my hardest to make something out of this newest development in the picture puzzle.

Who was this Mr. Hamish Griffin, anyway? Not any New York bank director, I was willing to bet. He was too blamed handy with a jimmy to make that statement hold together. But if he wasn't what he claimed to be, what the devil was he? Crowding closely upon the heels of that demand came a big scare. If the character in which I just seen him was his true one, he was no fit man to walk on the same side of the street with my dear girl—much less to be posing as her father's friend and possible savior and talking about making a family matter of the pipe works rescue.

From that stepping-stone in the middle of the creek to the next was a mighty short jump. Eva must know what I knew, and be told it quickly. She had been insisting all along that this bird was a tender-hearted gentleman, too high minded to take advantage of the leverage afforded by his money; and she believed it. But I was beginning to doubt a lot of things, among them the general assumption that he was the easy-mark multimillionaire investor that everybody seemed to think he was.

I was halfway up the stair on my way to the closeted telephone when I heard the faint skirling of the bell and went on a blind run through the house to answer it. I knew it must be Eva calling, and I nearly had a case of heart failure, because I felt sure she wouldn't take the risk of betraying my hiding place unless something serious had broken loose.

Something had broken loose: I could tell it by the way her voice was shaking when she answered my "Hello."

"Is that you, Jeffy?—oh, dear—you must

forgive me for t-taking the risk, but I simply *had* to! Can you come to-night—right away? I can't tell you anything over the wire; it's too—too tremendous!"

"Sure I'll come," I said. "I was on the way to phone to ask you if I mightn't when you called. Is the coast clear?"

"Yes; everybody's gone to bed at last. I've waited and *waited*."

"Make the wait just a few minutes longer and I'll be with you," I told her; and then, curiosity getting the upper hold in spite of all I could do: "Say, honey child; is it good news or bad?"

"I d-don't know," she stammered; "I'm so upset that I can't even think straight. Please hurry!"

I said I would, hung up, rushed downstairs to put on my shoes, and soon was out in the cracking cold of the night again and on my way. Since there didn't seem to be any special need for the back-alley approach this time, I went by way of the street and the sidewalk gate; and the front door of the old brick house swung open before I could lay my hand on the knob.

"Sh—quietly!" she cautioned; "daddy may not be asleep yet." Then she took me by the hand and led me through the unlighted hall to the little den room in the rear. Not until we were behind a closed door did she switch the reading lamp on, and then I saw that her eyes were big with excitement. Her first words told me the reason.

"Oh, Jeffy, dear—I—I believe I've found it at last!" she fluttered.

"Found what?"

"The thing we've been looking for; the—the 'make-ready,' you called it, didn't you?"

There was a copy of the *New Epoch* magazine lying opened and faced down on the reading table, and she pointed to it.

"Sit down there and read it for yourself while I pour you a cup of coffee. I won't say a single word. I want to see if it strikes you the same way it did me."

I obeyed literally. The marked article was under the general heading, "New Discoveries in Food Values," and was rather densely scientific, I thought, for a supposedly popular magazine. After mentioning a lot of unusual things that the war necessities had taught us to eat, it went on to tell of a valuable food element which had long been known to laboratory experimenters, but which, when isolated, was not available either as a food or a medicine, the writer using pretty much the same language that uncle Jeffrey had when he was telling me about his bonanza find.

This principle or element—which the writer called "rancynin"—was found, he said, in many common articles of food, but only in infinitesimal proportions. Where it was present to any appreciable extent it was a tremendous aid to digestion and assimilation. He cited cheese as an example. Cheese, it seemed, carried the element; but since it was itself a food hard to digest, it remained for some one to discover some other and more easily digestible food containing "rancynin" in curative quantities. When that discovery was made—and he added that there was now good assurance that it had been made—he predicted that there would be a demand, measurable by at least half of the total population of a nation of semidyspeptics like America, for the designated food.

"Well?" said the dear girl, half impatiently, when she had brought me my cup of heart-warming coffee.

"It does look sort of come-on-ish," I admitted. "But, Eva, it leaves us right where we were before. Uncle Jeffrey told me fully as much as this magazine writer does—all but the name of the thing. And the name, 'rancynin,' by itself doesn't push us along very far."

"I know; but I can't help feeling that this is one of the 'fad starters' that your uncle told about. It fits in so beautifully. Thousands of people will read that article, and the minute they are told what the 'rancynin' food is, they'll buy it and eat it."

That line of reasoning was perfectly flawless, and I said so. But we hadn't the food to sell, even if the whole universe were yowling for it.

"That's the important part of it," I pointed out. "If we knew the name of the food and all about it, we still couldn't turn a wheel. Uncle Jeffrey claimed that he had the visible supply locked up and put away. If I knew what it is and where it is, I couldn't just go and lay hands on it without the contracts or bills of sale, or whatever documents passed into uncle Jeffrey's hands when he bought the stuff."

"That is so," she admitted sorrowfully. "And I thought I'd done something big when I found that magazine article. It doesn't even help."

"It might, if we could chase it a little

farther into its hole. Have you looked this word 'rancynin' up in the dictionary?"

"I've looked for it," she qualified. "It isn't there."

"Well, that doesn't spell anything, either way," I offered. "A lot of these scientific terms never get into the dictionary at all; they're manufactured, for the most part. And a good many of them are merely trade names."

She sat down at the other side of the table and propped her pretty chin in her cupped hands.

" 'Rancynin'—it makes you think of 'rancid,' " she mused. "Butter turns rancid, and so does fat meat. I suppose you might call strong cheese rancid. What else is there?"

"The oils," I suggested; "the make-believe olive stuff that you buy for salad dressings, for example."

"No shortage of oil in the market," she said, with a shake of her head. "I bought a can of it to-day."

"And no shortage of butter or fat meat or cheese—if you have the price," I grinned.

It was beginning to look as if we had flushed a fine, large covey of wooden decoy ducks.

"We might write to the editor of the *Epoch* and ask him if he knows what his contributor is cackling about," was the only other ingredient I could find to put into the pot.

"Wait," she urged; "I'm trying to think of some other things that turn rancid"—and, after a bit—"why, of course!—*nuts!*"

This looked as if it might possibly be an idea.

"Is the market closed on nuts?" I asked.

"There it is again!" she lamented. "I got a package of assorted nuts for the table from one of the Chicago mail-order houses just the other day, and they didn't cost any more than everything else does, nowadays."

"Has the package been opened?"

She said she didn't know, but she'd go and see. In a minute or so she came back from the pantry with the parcels-post package still unbroken. We opened it and spread the contents out upon the table. There were pecans, almonds, filberts, English walnuts, shag-bark hickories, and even a few of the little three-cornered beechnuts.

"Nothing missing here," I said.

"No," she agreed rather mournfully, and began putting the nuts back into the paper sack.

"Never mind," I said, meaning to comfort her. "We'll wait, and watch the *Epoch*. If this write-up is a part of uncle Jeffrey's 'make-ready'—one of his fad starters—there'll be more of them."

"Yes; and while we're waiting—oh, Jeffy, dear! why *did* I drive you into taking that awful chance with your uncle's will!"

"Poots!" I scoffed; "you didn't drive me. I just gambled on it. Don't you know that a really red-blooded man will try anything—once? What's bothering me now is that I don't know exactly what to do next. If I show myself in daylight, bang will go those attachment papers, and I'll be begging a hand-out at people's back doors. And if I don't show myself——"

"Hush!—listen!" she breathed—and flicked off the light.

There was no mistaking the sounds we heard. Somebody—either her father or her aunt—was coming downstairs. In a flash Eva had me out in the rear hall and back through the dining room and kitchen in the dark. Hurriedly she pushed another well-filled market basket into my hands, opened the back door and crowded me out. I took the love shove and kept on going. A tangle of freshly strung clotheslines in the back yard promptly garroted me, and with a warm word for an aunt Malvina who would leave such a trap set for the unwary, I went around the house to the front. The street was clear, so I slipped out and ran for the corner.

As nearly as I could remember afterward, it was just beyond the turn from Decatur Street into Pleasant, and at the precise moment when I was recollecting that the untimely interruption had kept me from telling Eva the tremendously important thing I had come to tell her, that the sidewalk suddenly flew up and hit me in the back of the head—or that was the fleeting impression I got between the hearse and the grave, as you might say.

And after that, I didn't remember anything.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN ON THE COT.

When I came to, I was lying flat on my back in the middle of the sidewalk, with my arms and legs spraddled all over the place, and all two of each seemingly frozen

stiff. On top of that, my head was buzzing like a sawmill in action, and when I tried to get up, the world went spinning round in a most discouraging fashion.

Getting a bit of feeling thrashed and stamped into my benumbed outworks after a while, I began in a dazed sort of way to gather up a few impressions—and the contents of the provision basket, which had been scattered hither and yon; a loaf of bread here, a can of salmon there, and so on. I remember thinking, in a dubbish sort of way, that it was a commentary on the early-to-bed habits of the old town that nobody had happened along to stumble over the wreck while I was taking my nap and blocking the public sidewalk. Quite evidently, nobody had.

With the salvaging completed, I went staggering up the street, still more or less dippy and confused. At the back of my head there was a lump the size of half a hen's egg, and I wondered how in blazes I could have hit myself such a crack in an ordinary slip and tumble. Though it was only a little over four blocks to the end of the street, the distance seemed to pull itself out to a mile; and when I finally reached the stone-step approach to my refuge I was forced to sit down and pull myself together a bit before I could go on.

Once more safe in the old dungeon cellar, I turned on the light, renewed the fire, which had burned unaccountably low, and sat down to try to reassemble things. It was when I took out my watch to wind it that I got the first real shock. I had left the Locksley house at a little past ten, and now the watch hands were pointing to midnight!—which meant that I had been blotted out for considerably more than an hour. Why I hadn't frozen to death in that length of time I don't know. For that matter, now that I was feeling the warmth of the fire I found that my fingers and toes were frostbitten; and the exquisite pain of their thawing out helped a lot toward quickening the dulled mentality.

One result of the quickening was an increasing wonder that an ordinary slip and fall could have produced such astonishing results. The bump at the back of my head was still throbbing like a jumping toothache. It was a little to one side, and so low down that I was more than puzzled to understand how a flat sidewalk could have hit me in that place and at that angle.

It was only by slow degrees that the idea began to jam itself into my befuddled brain that possibly, just possibly, there was more to the slip and tumble than appeared on the surface. There had been a number of holdups in neighboring towns, and the papers had ranted more or less about a "crime wave." But robbery was always the object, and if I had been sandbagged, why hadn't I been robbed? I still had my watch and my money; and a hasty search seemed to prove that none of my pocket belongings were gone. Keys, knife, tobacco wallet, pipe, letters, and memoranda, were all able to answer "present." Had there been anything else that a holdup man might want and take?

It came to me in a flash when I stuck an investigative finger and thumb into the waistcoat pocket which had held the little flat brass key casting taken from uncle Jeffrey's spite furnace. The pocket was empty.

That little discovery surely brought on more talk; or it would have if I'd had anybody to talk to. Thanks to the spying job of the night before, I knew that there was only one man in Middleboro to whom that key casting would mean anything. It was clear enough now; Griffin had ambushed me, believing, no doubt, that I had the key, of which the asbestos block carried the imprint, somewhere in my clothes.

That guess—and I was convinced of its accuracy—made a good, wide breach in some of the mysteries. Griffin; millionaire, yeggman, bank director, sandbagger—whatever he might be—held at least some of the pieces of my puzzle picture, and he was planning and scheming to bilk me out of the whole shooting match. "Good enough," I muttered. "From this time on, it's you and I for it, Mr. Hamish Griffin, and the best man takes the pot. You want my girl and my fortune, but if you get either one, you'll be going some. Look out for yourself the next time I get a crack at you!"

This muttered "defi" was all very well to listen to, but where was I going to break in? Nowhere, at midnight, in zero weather, and with a head buzzing like a beehive, I admitted. And at that, I put more coal on the fire, rolled myself in the cot blankets, and resolutely made up my mind to shelve the whole blamed business for the next few hours at least.

When I awoke I found that, as on the

previous day, I had slept very late; and I wished it was still later when I remembered that I'd have to wait for night and darkness before I could make another move. Of the time I had getting rid of time until night should come, the less said, the better. Grouching like a bear with a sore head—and my head was still as sore as a boil—I wore out the hours in alternate hot and cold fits; hot when I crouched before the furnace fire and dwelt on my wrongs; cold when I rambled all over the deserted house in a vain attempt to kill the lagging minutes and hours by slow torture.

Three times during the day I tried to call up Eva, wishful to make an appointment for the evening; but each time luck was against me. Once it was father Harvey who answered the phone, and the other two times it was aunt Muriel. Since I couldn't talk to either of them without betraying myself, I had to hang up quick and call it a failure.

Never mind—all things come to an end, some time, and that age-long day did, after a while. As soon as it was dark I made ready to go gunning for my holdup man. In the house wandering and rummaging through the day, I had come across an old-fahioned revolver and a few cartridges in a drawer in the attic laboratory. Though I made no question but that the cartridges were so ancient that they wouldn't fire on a bet, I chucked the weapon into my overcoat pocket before sallying out.

Once more I had the satisfaction of rambling unrecognized through the streets of my native town. It was still cold enough to excuse turned-up coat collars and pulled-down hat brims, and to make people hurry when they were going anywhere. At the St. Nicholas corner I began to look for my man. Through the windows I could see nearly all of the office interior and quite all of the dining room. He wasn't in either place. I took a slow turn around the block and tried again. There were more people in the dining room, but still no Griffin.

Another turn, and then a third, and still no luck. A horrid fear began to gnaw me. What if, with the key casting and the asbestos-block fire photograph together, he had worked out the puzzle and was already gone on his way to clean me up? I took a fourth and longer turn to think about this new and palsying possibility. When I returned, the hotel dinner hour was about over and the dining room was nearly empty.

As I stood beside the entrance, all hunched up like a frozen tramp, two men, strangers to me, came out, and one of them stopped to relight his cigar.

"Sorry we couldn't get hold of Griffin," he was saying to the other. "I believe we stand an even chance of pulling him in on that proposition of remodeling the Higglestown Machine Works into an accessory plant. He's got all kinds of money."

"Yes," said the other; "it's a frost that he happened to be dining out. But we'll catch him later in the week. Did the clerk tell you where he is?"

The cigar lighter's match had burned out, and he was buttoning his coat.

"At some private house—a Mr. Locksley's, I think the boy said." And at this they tramped off together toward the railroad station.

I had been shivering the minute before, but now I was hot enough to set the world afire. So these cold-blooded beggars, whoever they were, were already figuring on what they were going to do with my little all—and with Griffin's money for backing, at that! "Damn you!" I gritted, shaking a fist at the disappearing pair, "if you don't hurry, your slick-tongued capitalist will be too dead to stake you—put that in your cigar holder and smoke it, will you!"

Then, too, that other added thorn: Griffin was dining at the Locksleys'. Heavens! would my dear girl and her too-confiding old father never tumble to the crookedness of this sandbagging scoundrel? Just here another of those unaccountable little gusts of sanity came along to warn me against taking too much for granted. Truly, I had twice caught Griffin rummaging in a house that wasn't his, and the second time he had stolen something which might, or might not, be of value to somebody. Truly, also, my key-casting had disappeared; but did I have any reasonable proof that Griffin had knocked me on the head and robbed me of it?

Chewing over these conflicting distractions in considerable wretchedness, I wandered all over the town, having in mind some vague idea that I'd hang around and catch Griffin on his return to the hotel, but not being very certain of what I should do if I did. Finally, after I had passed and repassed the St. Nicholas corner about a million times fruitlessly, I gave it up and turned my steps toward the grim old house on the hill. My head was still aching like thunder, and it

seemed as if the comfort, even of the dirty and evil-smelling cellar, was a thing to be longed for.

It was between ten and eleven o'clock when I thrust my key into the lock of the side door and let myself into an interior which was by now beginning to be more or less familiar. Steering the well-trodden course to the kitchen, I felt my way down the cellar stair. A strong smell of tobacco smoke greeted me, and I wondered that the odor of my pipe should last so long.

Groping my way to the proper place I reached up and switched on the light. As I did this I got the shock of my life. Sitting at his ease on the cot, and calmly smoking one of the gold-banded cigars, was Mr. Hamish Griffin.

CHAPTER XII.

A TRY-OUT AND A FIND.

According to all the dramatic unities the discovery of the heavy villain lying in wait, so to speak, in the hero's cellar boudoir should have been the signal for the exchange of a few brief, biting words, a clinch, and a life-and-death struggle staging itself admirably—for the dramatic effect—among the ash cans and rubbish heaps.

But, perhaps, you've noticed that the real thing is more than apt to fuzzle up the unities; to gum the cards so that they won't run, either from the top or the bottom of the deck. The sight of Griffin lounging comfortably on my cot and enjoying his cigar simply knocked me speechless for the moment; and that moment was all he needed.

"Well, well—see who's here!" he slid in genially, giving me the smile that had captured a good half of Middleboro. Awfully thoughtless of me not to have turned the light on. Didn't mean to give you a shock, I'm sure. Nipping cold outside, isn't it?"

Just figure this little run-in for yourself. I'd been ransacking the town for this billy bird, thirsting like an old soak in a dry county for a chance to begin squaring things up with him—lugging an antiquated firearm filled with still more antiquated ammunition—by George!—for that very identical purpose. And here I blow in to find him making himself familiarly at home in my cellar!

"This is one time when a dip into the soft-soap barrel doesn't get you anywhere!" I rasped. "I've been looking for you. Right here and now is where we start something and one or the other of us gets off—hits the ballast!"

"Tut, tut!" he expostulated affably, "you're warm now, Burrell—or maybe it's the cold. Take your time and let the temperature readjust itself. I don't mind waiting a bit longer."

The easy nonchalance of the gink knocked me flat; I can't deny it.

"I'll admit that you've got me guessing, all ways for Sunday, Griffin," I growled, stripping my overcoat and pulling up an empty box to plant myself squarely before him. "If there is any good reason why I shouldn't drill you full of quarter-inch holes, I'm ready to hear it. But you'll have to talk fast."

He smiled in a sort of patronizing way that made my back hair bristle.

"Can't break away from the shop, can you, Burrell? Boring holes in things is a part of your trade, isn't it? But you may set your mind at rest as to the drilling process you suggest. That mid-Victorian gatling you have in your pocket is perfectly harmless, you know. I satisfied myself of that fact some three nights ago."

By Jove! The intuition of the buzzard was positively uncanny. How did he know that I had a gun, and that it was the one he had doubtless fingered the night that Eva and I had disturbed him in his job of rummaging? But I passed that up.

"Get down to business," I rapped out. "Three nights ago you came here looking for something you hadn't lost. Two nights ago you did it again. Last night you burked me with a piece of lead pipe, or something of that sort, and picked my pocket. Hence the need for a few of those quarter-inch holes. Possibly the old gun wouldn't make 'em, but I don't believe you want me to try it."

"I didn't come here to quarrel with you, Burrell—far from it," he cut in smoothly. "Really, you know, I'm here to do you a service, if you'll listen to reason. But first as to the 'burking,' as you call it: you slipped on the icy sidewalk and fell down; that is the explanation you'll give to others if you have occasion to speak of it—and the one you'll come to accept for yourself, after you've had time to think it over. If some one came along later and went through your pockets, why, that's another matter."

"I shall hold my own opinion as to both

halves of that," I grunted. "But what are you here for?—what do you want?"

"Now you are talking like a sensible man —which, I am sure, is what you are when you are entirely normal. Let's go back a bit for a fair start. What were your ambitions—before this Grimsby will affair came up and slapped you in the face? Stay; you needn't tell me; I'll tell you. You meant to make a modest, workingman success of your two-by-four machine shop over yonder in Higglestown, marry some good girl, and settle down to raise a family. Fine! Excellent! The backbone of our America is built up in just that way, of just such people."

"Huh! it is, eh?" I snorted.

"You were all right and normal until the money bug came along and bit you," he went on calmly. "Then you went loco, as many another man has under similar conditions. You would take a gambler's chance—and you've lost. You're up in the air, and the next question is, where are you going to land?"

As so many times before in this wretched muddle I was merely in transit; I wasn't arriving.

"Hold on," I snapped; "tell me just who and what you are, Griffin: maybe that will simplify matters a little and give us a short cut to wherever it is we're going."

"With pleasure. When your uncle was alive, we'll assume that I was his New York backer and business partner."

"You can prove that, I take it?"

"Very easily; only it isn't at all necessary to the present argument. Let us deal with the facts as they stand. On the thirtieth of November you were telephoned for, and you came here to this house, to find your uncle on his deathbed. He told you—we may suppose—that he had made his will in your favor, and you had reason to believe you were coming in for a fortune. Afterward, it transpired that there was a 'joker' in the will, and you probably know better than anybody else why it was put there. All Middleboro knows how the affair has turned out. Your uncle's fortune—and it is evident that he had been something better than a millionaire—has disappeared, and you are smashed."

"Still, I don't see where you break in," I barked.

"A little more patience," he ran on soothingly. "You made the capital mistake that so many men in your class are constantly making: you tried to sit in at the big game without first learning the rules. At the present moment you don't know how to make the next move; in fact, there isn't any 'next move' for you. Am I right?"

"Come to the point!" I ripped out. "You're keeping the undertaker waiting!"

"All right," he agreed, again handing me the genial smile which seemed to be his principal stock in trade. "The point is just here: I know what Jeffrey Grimsby did with his fortune, and you don't—or do you?"

I should have lied to him if it had done any good, but the facts were against me. It said itself that I wouldn't be dodging the sheriff if I could have laid hands upon even a small part of the vanished fortune.

"I don't—and I don't believe you do," was what I said.

Once more I got the capturing smile.

"Let it stand that way, if it pleases you better. Let us assume that I am willing to take a chance on what I think I know. Will you sell?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'll make it workingman plain. I'm offering to buy—for cash—your interest in your uncle's estate."

"Is that so?" I scoffed. "Then you're either buying a pig in a poke—or you're not. We'll try it out. How much am I offered? Going—one job lot of junked money and a choice assortment of unpaid debts. What do I hear for a bid?"

He took off his overcoat, banked it and the cot pillows up for a better elbow rest, and lighted a fresh cigar.

"That's right," he said, between gentle little dabblings at the new cigar with the lighted match; "there's always hope for a man who can see the humor in a situation. Now let's see just how bad things are. What do you stand to lose on this will speculation?"

I didn't see any special reason for lying to him.

"Putting my plant in at what it will probably bring under the hammer, I'm due to be shy about twenty thousand dollars," I told him.

"Yes; but that isn't all. In addition to the loss of your property, there will be judgments out against you for some portion, large or small, of your uncle's debts. Bear in mind that I'm proposing to assume all these liabilities myself; to relieve you of

them entirely. Taking that view of the matter, would a round sum of, say, twenty-five thousand dollars, spot cash, look good to you?"

You can bet your life I did some pretty swift thinking just about then. No man in his senses, no matter how far up Easy Street he might be living, would plank down twenty-five thousand iron men, and take a chance of having to put up six or eight times as much more to clear his title, unless he held a straight flush and knew there was money enough in the pot to make it worth while.

"What do I do to earn the twenty-five thousand?" I asked, bluffing a bit to gain time.

"Two or three things: first of all, you transfer your interest in your uncle's estate over to me; sell it outright to me for a consideration."

"And next?"

"Next, with the estate I should naturally expect you to include any little items of your uncle's personal property you have taken possession of since his death; to specify particularly, I want you to give me that key that you found in your uncle's laboratory three nights ago, Burrell."

For a second or so he had me going. What he said meant, if it meant anything, that he didn't know the key had been burned up; he evidently believed I had found and taken it before he'd had his chance at it. But also it meant more than this; it was proof positive that he hadn't picked my pocket of the little brass casting: if he had, he would have known what it was and that the key had been destroyed. Sorting these swiftly drawn conclusions like a juggler keeping five balls in the air at one time, I felt my way a step farther.

"That key is worth a couple of million dollars to the man who has it, isn't it?" I asked, with all the innocence I could jam into the words.

"I'm not prepared to say that it is worth anything to anybody," he fought off, "though it may have a certain value for the man who has it and knows what to do with it." Then he made it more explicit. "That key is nothing more than a bit of scrap brass to you, Burrell, and that is all you'll ever be able to make of it. You might search for a thousand years and never find the lock for which it was designed."

"Can *you* find the lock?" I demanded.

"I'm taking my chance. You may call it a gamble—as yours was on the will. The difference lies just here; I can afford to lose, and you couldn't."

"You've named two of the requirements; are there any more?" I inquired.

"One more; and your good, hard, workingman's sense will tell you that I'm right about it. Of course, you know all about Mr. Harvey Locksley's difficulties, and I don't need to remind you that bankruptcy and total loss at his time of life is practically a death warrant for a man of his temperament."

"That is probably what the doctors would say," I conceded.

"Very well. You'd help him if you could; only you can't turn a wheel in the financial machine. But there is one thing you must do: you must set his daughter free from a foolish engagement which can't mean anything but a life of restricted opportunities for her. To put it in language that you can understand, she is out of your class, Burrell; she wasn't cut out for a workingman's wife—you know that as well as I do."

Say! This smooth-tongued, fat-faced cuckoo bird may have had some mighty narrow escapes in his various nest robbings, but not one of them, I'll dare swear, was narrower than this he was crooking his finger at so carelessly in that dimly lighted cellar. "Workingman"—he said it as if he were saying "ape" or "monkey" or "ourangutan!" I could have pulled his head off on the spot.

"Well?" he prompted, after the pause in which I had been struggling with the homicidal devil had grown overlong, "does my bid go?"

"No!" I couldn't have compassed more than the one word to save my soul.

"You won't sell your—ah—bankruptcy at what might be called an exceedingly liberal figure?"

"No!"

"And you won't give me that key?—the key that you'll never be able to use?"

"Not on your life!"

"Where is it?" He shot the question at me as a man would hurl a brick in a mob, counting, as I made no doubt, that the boltlike suddenness of it might make me betray myself.

"It's where you'll never find it," I gritted.

"One last question; and if you're still ob-

stinate—well, in that case we may have to put the screws on and squeeze you a bit harder. In the Locksley matter: you've got to break off this boy-and-girl affair and——"

Zowie! It was the final straw that sprained the camel's back. With a yell that might have fitted one of those animal names that he didn't quite call me, I landed on him. He saw it coming just in time to jump to his feet and make a quick pass for his right hip pocket. I knew, or thought I knew, what that meant, and the wrestle hold I got on him kept him from pulling whatever it was he was reaching for.

Still and all, he wasn't helpless, not by any manner of means; he put up a fight that would have been a credit to an all-around athlete. With a vigorous handling of himself that was astonishing in a man so well rounded and fat-padded, he returned my clinch, and, locked in what I was trying my best to turn into a half-nelson, we thrashed around in that cluttered cellar, upsetting ash cans, falling over the cot, banging against the furnace and its pipes.

He proved a good, healthy handful, I'll tell the world; but after a time, after we'd crashed and stumbled over everything in sight, the "workingman" muscles began to tell. With a leg lock that he couldn't break, and my chin hooked over his collar bone, I was slowly putting a crook in his back that no man's spine—not even a contortionist's—was ever built to stand.

He stood it as long as he could, and then the squawk had to come.

"Good God, Burrell—let up!—you're breaking my back!"

I ought to have done it while the breaking was good. A broken back was the one thing he was needing most. But, of course, I had to be chicken-hearted and ease up. The minute I did it, his right hand whipped free and flew to that hip pocket. When it came back it was clutching a—well, to tell the blank truth, I don't know what sort of a weapon it was that he pulled on me, any more than to say that in the glimpse I had of it, it looked like one of those rubber bulbs you use for spraying your throat. What I do know is that he chucked the contrivance into my face and a sort of freezing spray shot out of it. Two gasps and I was gone, mumbling a little prayer that the good Lord would forgive me just that one time for letting a mushy heart make a fool of me.

When I woke up I was lying upon the cot, and it still lacked an hour of midnight. So I hadn't been blotted out very long. But the time had been sufficient to enable the Griffin buzzard to go through me good and proper. Every pocket in my clothes was turned inside out, and the search had been thorough enough to satisfy old Mr. Hawkshaw himself.

I chuckled, in spite of the sick aftermath of the drug shot which was beginning to upset me. Griffin had been looking for the key again—the key that didn't exist. It was some little comfort to know that if the grapes hung too high for me to reach, they were also safely skied, for the time being, anyway, for this fox of the world.

Sitting on the edge of the cot I looked around me at the scene of the late scrap. The battlefield was sure in a mess. Ash cans had been knocked over and their contents strewn broadcast. But one of the upset cans hadn't held ashes. It had been full to the brim of—I reached down groggily and gathered up a handful. The brown, chippy litter proved to be nut shells, pecks and bushels of them; the table leavings of years, I took it, brought to the basement to be burned in the furnace.

With a sort of reluctant notion that I ought, for the sake of my own self-respect, to straighten up the battle wreck a bit, I began to put my pockets back where they belonged. Turning the right-hand waistcoat pocket into its place, I found a hole in it; and beyond the hole, down between the lining and the outer cloth, there was something hard; a paper-wrapped something that had slipped through the hole.

I knew what the thing was before I dug it out. It was that little old flat brass key casting which had cunningly hidden itself, once to the befuddlement of the fool who thought he had lost it, and a second time to the foiling of an accomplished stick-up man!

CHAPTER XIII.

NOBODY AT HOME.

I didn't have much time to speculate on the recovery, if you call it so, of the little key casting. While I was staring at the bit of metal, there came noises abovestairs; the slam of a door and heavy footfalls. The after effects of the dope shot Griffin had given me were getting in their work pretty savagely by this time, and it was as a sick

man that I reached for my overcoat and began to feel in the pockets for the old revolver. If the footsteps overhead meant another fight, I was in no shape to hold up my end empty-handed.

The midnight intruder came straight through the dining room and kitchen—so straight that I knew he must have a light of some sort—and then I heard him clumping down my stair. When I got sight of him he proved to be a big, tough-looking citizen—a stranger—muffled to the heels in a long coat, and he was grinning sourly.

"Run ye down at last, didn't I?" he chuckled, as he swung into the cellar and jackknifed his long length upon the empty box seat. " 'Twarn't no kind o' use to try to run away from the lawr; it'll allus git ye, sooner 'r later."

"You're the deputy sheriff from Higglestown?" I mumbled.

"You said a mouthful."

"Who told you where to find me?"

"I reckon that ain't none of your business. I'm here with the papers. Want me to read 'em to yuh?"

I didn't want anything but to be left alone with the overpowering qualms that were making me see purple. I saw what had happened. This man had been hanging around in Middleboro waiting for me to turn up. Griffin had known this, and upon leaving me had routed him out to tell him where I was hiding.

"Get through with your job and clear out!" I grated. "I'm a sick man, and I'm going to be sicker in a few minutes."

"Yuh do look sort o' peaked," he grunted; and then he shoved a legal-looking paper at me: " 'Tachment in the case o' the creditors o' Jeffrey Grimsby 'g'inst the estate o' the said Jeffrey Grimsby an' others," he parroted; and I stuck the paper into my pocket without looking at it. For that matter, with the cellar going black on me about every second minute, I couldn't have read it if I had tried.

"That's all but signin' yer name," he went on, producing another paper. "Got a fountain pen?"

I hadn't, and he dug out one of his own, getting up to kick the empty box over to me for a writing table. "Right there on that dotted line," he directed, holding the folded paper on the box; "I got to show that to prove 'at I got service on yuh."

I signed blindly, just as I would have done almost anything he had asked, for the sake of getting rid of him. Thrusting the signed paper into his pocket, he buttoned his coat over it.

"Want me to rout ye out a doctor 'r anything?" he asked.

"I don't want a thing on earth but to hear your feet chasing themselves out of this!" I rasped; and in another minute or so the house door had slammed overhead and I was alone.

After that—oh, man! but I was the sickest mortal that ever groaned! For the next two or three hours I was like the seasick man: afraid I'd die, one minute, and the next, only afraid I wouldn't. When the horrible nausea finally let up it left me as spent and gone as an empty gas bag, and I fell into a sleep of exhaustion that ran unbroken into a new day.

Coming out of the sleep trance somewhere about the middle of the next forenoon I found myself as weak as a cat, but otherwise fairly at myself. A cup of strong coffee brewed over the furnace fire helped out some, and I was able to take a square look at the new face of things. Since I had been stripped bare, there was now no longer any need for the hide-out; so, after a bucket bath, I tramped over the hill to the old barn, cranked up the flivver, took a chance on the drained radiator until I got to a farmhouse where I could beg a filling of water, and so drove around into town.

Putting the car up, I made a straight shoot for Oswald's office, showing up there about eleven o'clock. My smartly groomed little lawyer didn't seem greatly surprised to see me.

"Well," he said, "so you're back again, are you, Jeffy? Did you gain anything by your drop-out?"

Here was a bid to tell him all I knew, but I didn't take it; I remembered in time that he was Hamish Griffin's lawyer as well as mine.

"Had a chance to think over my sins; which ought to be worth something," I replied. Then I shoved the boat over to the other side of the creek. "What's been doing since I went away?"

He shook his neat little head gloomily.

"Bad medicine, Jeff. Mugridge has been working on Harvey Locksley; telling him that he is merely delaying things by taking the thirty days the law allows before foreclosure proceedings are begun. The old

man is about ready to let go all holds and sign away his rights to everything he has. He understands that it is only prolonging the agony to hang on."

"And your other client?" I wedged in.

"Mr. Griffin? I don't know. I've been hoping that he would step in at the last moment and buy up the claims against Mr. Locksley. Maybe he will, yet. But you, Jeff—what are you going to do?"

I laughed, a bit grimly, I guess.

"Becker got service on me through one of his deputies last night, and I'm skinned. I've a little less than a hundred dollars in my inside pocket. If you can suggest any useful thing I can do with that amount——"

The neat little head was wagging again.

"You'll have to begin 'way back at the bottom, won't you—as a journeyman in somebody's shop? That's hard; and it shoves your marriage with Eva still farther into the future—or have you decided to do the generous thing about that?"

I was carefully looking out of the office window when I said: "I'll have a talk with Eva to-day. Where is Griffin now?"

"He went away on the morning train—to Cleveland, I think. He said he'd be back to-morrow morning."

There didn't seem to be any more news to be picked up here, and I was getting up to go when the telephone rang. Oswald pulled the phone over and answered. I heard him say: "What do you say?—long distance?—all right; shoot." There was a little pause while the connection was making, and I moved toward the door. Oswald put his hand over the transmitter and called me back.

"It's Mr. Righter—your Higglestown banker," he explained. "He is asking for you."

I sat down and took the phone. "This is Burrell talking," I said.

"All right; glad to hear your voice again," came back over the wire. "We've been trying to locate you all morning. Been away somewhere, haven't you? I just wanted to ask what you want done with your money; whether you want it put into your checking account, or——"

"What's that?" I broke in; "what money?"

"Why, the money that you deposited—or that was deposited for you—this morning; the twenty-five thousand dollars."

"The twen—who deposited it?"

"Your man Ruddle."

The universe was tumbling in upon me, two or three planets at a time, but I had just wit enough left not to muddle things worse than they were by throwing a long-distance fit for Righter's benefit.

"Oh—ah—yes—all right," I said weakly. "Just put it in the checking account for the present." And then I hung up before any of the fixed stars should begin to rain down.

"More bad news?" said Oswald, when I slid down in the chair gasping for breath.

I told him what Righter had told me; just that, and no more. It knocked him as flat as it had me.

"Why, good Lord!" he ejaculated; "you haven't sold the machine works, have you?"

"Sold the plant? I told you not ten minutes ago that it was taken away from me by the sheriff last night."

"But this money—here, take the phone and call up Ruddle."

I did it, and what I got out of Jimmie Ruddle wouldn't have wadded a gun properly. Opening his mail, he had found an unstamped envelope in it; one that hadn't been through the post office. On the face of it was written in blue pencil, "For deposit to the credit of Mr. Burrell." The inclosure was a New York draft, issued by the Middleboro National, for twenty-five thousand dollars, and he had deposited it as directed. The draft was made payable to my order, and he understood that Mr. Righter would give me credit and hold the paper until I could come over and sign it. That was all there was to it.

By this time I was beginning to crawl out of the crash of worlds far enough to be hit by something that rushed up out of the experience of the night before. Twenty-five thousand dollars was the exact figure of the bid Griffin had made; the sum for which I was to sell everything but my immortal soul! But I *hadn't* sold.

"What is it?" Oswald asked, seeing me turn blue or green, or some other sickly hue.

"N-nothing; I don't feel very well," I stammered. And then: "I guess I'm losing whatever little scrap of mind I ever had, Bert. Could a man be drugged in such a way that he'd talk in his sleep, and perhaps sign papers, without his knowing anything about it afterward?"

"That's a question for the doctors," he said. "I never heard of any such thing. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. Er—a lot of things happened to me last night, and I can't seem to get 'em straight; at least, nothing but the serving of that attachment notice by Becker's man."

"The attachment? What's that got to do with this money shower? Have you got the paper with you?"

I groped in my pocket, found it, and gave it to him. He had no more than glanced at it before he bounced out of his chair with something that was as near a cuss word as he ever permitted himself to use.

"*Jeff!*" he exploded, "did you read this thing when you took it?"

I shook my head. "I was too sick to read anything."

"It isn't an attachment notice at all!" he barked. "It's the regular blank, all right, but filled out with a lot of legal catch phrases that don't mean anything at all. It's a pure fake! Do you know the deputy who gave it to you?"

"No; and I thought I knew all of Becker's men, too. He made me sign a receipt for it."

"A receipt? Good heavens, Jeff, you must have been mighty sick—or crazy! Did you read the receipt?"

"No."

"What did it look like?"

"I don't know. It was a folded paper; he said it was the return he had to make. I'm afraid, now, that it wasn't. I'm scared to death for fear it was a—ah—er—a bill of sale of some sort."

"A bill of sale? For what?"

I couldn't go on blundering around this way forever without telling him something more than I had told him, so I waded in a bit farther.

"Some while before this sheriff man found me I'd been asked if I would sell out for twenty-five thousand dollars, you know."

"Sell the machine works?"

"No; my interest in uncle Jeffrey's estate."

Oddly enough, he didn't stop to ask who had made the bid.

"You had a chance to stick somebody else and refused it?"

"I did."

He banged himself into his chair with the air of one giving up in despair.

"Jeff, you're the limit—absolutely the limit! First you insist upon sitting in at a game where you know that the cards are stacked dead against you; and then——"

I stopped him.

"We'll take the cussing out for granted. What I want to know now is whether or not I *have* sold out. I'm telling you again and yet again that I didn't mean to."

"I'll humor you," he snapped, jumping up again and reaching for his hat and coat. "Stay here until I can go around to the bank. If anybody has been fool enough to buy your chance in the lottery with that twenty-five-thousand-dollar draft when you were asleep or drunk, there'll be some record of it."

He was gone less than a quarter of an hour and when he came back his face was a handsome mask of mystification.

"If I didn't know better, I should say that the whole blooming world has gone bughouse, Jeff," he began solemnly. "You must have been something worse than balmy last night when all these things happened to you."

"Perhaps I was. What did you find out?"

"You've sold out, all right, whether you meant to or not."

"Who was the buyer?"

"As near as I can make out, it was Jasper Mugridge, himself—the last man on earth, you'd say, to take a shot at anybody's lottery ticket."

There was no need for any more guesswork. Griffin had whipsawed me, using Mugridge as a go-between because he did not wish his own name to appear. And the paper I had signed: the Lord only knew what else, besides a transfer of my legacy, it covered. Maybe, for instance, I had agreed—as a part of the consideration—to break my engagement with Eva. There was no telling.

"I'm murdered, Bert," I choked, staggering to my feet. "You'll believe now, won't you, that I wasn't so crazy as I looked when I accepted the conditions of the will? Would anybody put up twenty-five thousand dollars for my chance if it wasn't worth something? And it was a crooked fraud, at that. There's only one thing left for me now, and that is to kill the man who framed it up on me." And with that I left him.

It was just about luncheon time when I got back to the hotel, but though I hadn't had any breakfast, I didn't feel much like eating, I'll tell the world. Things had certainly gone blooey for me, and the twenty-five-thousand-dollar draft awaiting my indorsement over in the Higglestown bank

didn't salve the wound a particle. At first, I thought I'd eat a bite and then go over and have it out with old Skinflint Mugridge; demand to be shown the paper I had signed, and all that; but a ray of common sense filtered through the murk just here to show me that he'd probably side-step—shift it off upon some customer whose name he would very properly refuse to divulge.

Bluffed out of that, the next biggest urge was the need for a heart-to-heart talk with Eva, and a confession to her of the perfectly crazy thing I had been trapped into doing. Since it was noon, and her father would be home for his luncheon, I had to wait a bit; and while I was waiting, I ate—and couldn't have told ten minutes afterward what I'd been eating if I'd died for it.

Working my way to Decatur Street the minute I thought I'd be safe to miss father Harvey, I rang the bell at the front door of the comfortable brick house. It was aunt Muriel whom I saw through the side lights coming downstairs to open the door; the dear old sweet-faced lady who had been a second mother to Eva almost as long as I could remember.

"Eva?" I said; "is she at home?"

For the first time in my knowing of her, aunt Muriel's fine gray eyes clouded with something like righteous indignation.

"Not to you, Jeffy," she said, clipping the words in a way that I had never suspected she could. And then: "I think you'd better not try to see her to-day—or any time soon."

And with that, she actually shut the door in my face!

CHAPTER XIV.

BERTHOLLETIA EXCELSA.

I leave it to you, kind friends, to say if there isn't a point at which a man may justifiably blow up like a Roman candle and do the first mad thing that pops into the back part of his head. When the good lady with the indignant eyes shut the door in my face it was the final bite of meat on the bone; I was primed for anything from a romp to a riot. Waiting only long enough to give her time to go back upstairs, I ducked around the house on its blind side and knocked at the kitchen door. Here it was the old colored cook who opened to me.

"Why, bless gresshus, if it ain't Mistuh Jeffy!" she was beginning; but I cut her off short.

"Miss Eva, aunt Malvina—do you know where she is?"

"Shuah I does. She done shet up in that li'l' den room o' her paw's an' wouldn' come out to eat no luncheon."

"I want to see her, aunt Malvina; I *must* see her. Can you smuggle me in without letting Miss Muriel know?"

"Huck!—reckin I kin if I wants to. Whut you been doin' to Miss Eva, Mistuh Jeffy?"

"That is exactly what I want to find out. I won't stay if she doesn't want to see me. Will you?"

The good old soul wiped her hands out of the dish water and beckoned me in. Tiptoeing ahead of me through the dining room, she listened for a minute at the stair foot. Then she led the way to the den door and left me. I suppose I should have rapped, but I didn't; I unlatched the door like a cautious burglar and stepped in. What I saw in the winter-daylighted little cubby-hole was aplenty. Eva was sitting at the reading table with her face buried in the crook of an arm. And when she looked up with a face pink-nosed and tear-streaked it was to sob out, "Oh, Jeffy, Jeffy!—how *could* you do it!"

There was a chair handy and I fell into it.

"Eva," I said shakily, "have I had a sunstroke in the middle of December? Or am I the only sane person in a dippy world? What is it you think I've done?"

"If I only *thought*—if I didn't *know!*" she shuddered. Then: "They—they showed daddy the paper you signed."

"They?—who?"

"Mr. Mugridge, I guess it was; I didn't ask."

"They told you what was in the paper?"

"Daddy did."

"And what was in it?"

"As if you didn't know! Oh, Jeffy—I never thought you'd s-sell me—for money!"

This was all I needed to know. They—Mugridge or Griffin, or both of them—had made father Harvey and this dear girl believe that I had washed my hands of the whole business—and of her—for the capital sum of twenty-five thousand dollars cash in hand to me paid.

"Look at me, Eva, girl," I gritted; "look me right in the eye. Now, then; have you ever caught me telling you a lie?"

"N-no."

"All right; I'm telling you the truth now. That paper—though it doubtless has my

name on it—is the cold-bloodedest swindle that was ever put over on a sick man. When I signed it I believed the man that brought it was the deputy sheriff from Higglestown serving those attachment papers on me. I didn't know until an hour ago that he wasn't. I've been robbed like a jackass, all the way round, but I'll be da—darned if I'm going to be robbed of you!"

Say! the way her pretty face cleared up was like the sun coming out from behind the clouds on the rainiest day that ever happened.

"Tell me—tell me everything I ought to know!" she commanded; and I did it, going back to the beginning of the Griffin snake dance and bringing the figures in it right up to date. When I got through she was holding her arms out to me, and I knew then that Mr. Hamish Griffin had got his, right square on the point of the jaw.

"I knew it!—I just couldn't believe it!" she gurgled, with the pink little nose tucked comfortably under my coat collar; and then she made me sit down in her father's big chair while she perched on the arm of it.

"You've got me, and I've got you, Jeffy; but that's all either of us have left. Daddy says he's tired of fighting, and he means to let go—and now they've stolen your fortune—it *is* a fortune or they wouldn't have stolen it."

"Yes," I said; "the fad maker's fortune. I guess it's to laugh, little girl. We've been trying to monkey with a machine that was a lot too big for us; too beautifully complicated for a couple of hicks like us to handle. I don't know yet who or what Griffin is, but the chances are he's the wire puller for some New York bunch of money big enough to swallow all Middleboro whole. I'll bet he had this thing all doped out fifteen minutes after he heard of uncle Jeffrey's death."

"Well, anyway, you have your twenty-five thousand dollars," she put in, meaning to comfort me.

"No, I haven't!" I blurbed. "That draft hasn't been indorsed yet, and I'm going to repudiate the whole blamed transaction, lock, stock, and barrel!"

"*Nice* big boy!" she cooed, slipping an arm around my neck. "You're going to fight them again for the phantom millions? Let's. Let's both fight them. I'm sure it's 'rancynin' now. Night before last, after you went away, I hunted through a lot more magazines and made as many as a dozen clippings about it. Some of them said that the fruit of the Bertholletia excelsa contained the rancynin in curative quantities. In those same magazines, in the advertising sections, there were some queer ads. I cut some of them out. Here is one"—and she took it from a pile of papers on the table. The full-page poster thing was as simple as the space it occupied must have been costly. This is what it said:

EAT RIGHT AND BE HAPPY.
CHEW A FEW
Meats of the Bertholletia Excelsa
After each Meal
AND WATCH YOURSELF GROW!
Ask Your Grocer.

"Funny, isn't it?" she said. "But I couldn't find out what 'Bertholletia excelsa' is."

"Look in the encyclopedia?"

"Yes; it isn't there—at least, not under that name. But ours is an old edition."

"The ad says, 'Ask your Grocer.' Did you?"

"I asked all up and down Main Street yesterday morning when I was marketing, but none of them had seen the ads or knew what I was talking about. Maybe Middleboro is too small a place."

"How about the dictionary?" I suggested.

She went to the library and came back in a moment lugging a fat volume of the "Century." "You look for it," I said, leaning back in the deep chair and closing my eyes. I was still shuddery enough from the upset of the night to find laziness grateful.

For a time there was only the rustling of the leaves of the big book as she turned them. Then I could hear her murmuring, "berry—berstle — berthage — berth-deck—berthing," as she worked her way down the page; then, suddenly, "Jeffy—*listen!*

" 'Bertholletia, named after Claude Louis Berthellot, a French chemist, 1748-1822. A genus of *Myrtacae,* of which only one species, *B. excelsa,* is known. It is a tree of large dimensions, and forms vast forests on the banks of the Amazon, Rio Negro, and Orinoco. It grows to a height of 150 feet, and its stem is from 3 to 4 feet in diameter. The fruit is known as the Brazil nut (which see).' "

"Niggertoes!" I shouted, leaping from my

chair. "And, say!—there wasn't a single one of them in that assorted package you opened the other night—not a blessed one! —and we never noticed that they were missing! And that isn't all; the cellar of that old castle up yonder on the hill is rotten with Brazil nutshells!"

"We can tell in a minute whether or not we're on the right track," she asserted, and now she was a lot cooler about it than I was. There was an extension telephone set in the den, and she called up the Bon Ton, Middleboro's biggest grocery. "Miss Locksley speaking," she said, in her evenest tone. "Will you please add a pound of Brazil nuts to my order for to-day?"

Of course, I couldn't hear what the grocery man replied, but it took him some little time to say it. When she rang off and turned to me her pretty lips were pressed tightly together and the brown eyes were snapping.

"There is no mistake about it this time, Jeffy. Marston says he hasn't any Brazil nuts; hasn't been able to buy any for weeks. He thinks the crop must have failed. He says everybody is asking for them, and he has wired Cleveland, Chicago, and New York. There are none to be had."

"Glory be!" I chanted; but the next instant the cold facts jumped in to give me another bucketing of ice water. The mere knowing the name of the thing that uncle Jeffrey had 'cornered' was like being given the tin handle with the dipper broken off. We, nor nobody else, could profit by the 'corner' without papers to prove ownership of the tied-up stocks. Besides, Griffin and Mugridge would probably turn heaven and earth upside down to prove that I had sold my birthright.

It was when I tried to show Eva how we were still stuck in the same old mudhole —only deeper—that I found out what a silken-strong, stubborn little fighter I was going to marry.

"You're not talking of lying down *now*, Jeffy!" she flung out. "Never!—not for one minute! Let me think for you—plan for you. You're not yourself yet, after that terrible experience of last night. The first thing is to return the big bribe and get that lying paper back from Mr. Mugridge. You must go to Bert Oswald and tell him everything. How long would it take Jimmie Ruddle to drive over here from Higglestown?"

"An hour, maybe, if he could get hold of a fast car."

"Call him now—over this phone. Tell him to get that draft out of Mr. Righter's bank and bring it to you at Bert's office, quick!"

Half dazed by the rapid fire of her planning, I obeyed. Ruddle was on the job; said he'd be on his way inside of ten minutes. To make assurance doubly sure, I shifted the long-distance call to the bank, and asked Righter to cancel the deposit that had been made in my name, and to give the draft to Ruddle when it should be called for.

"Good!" said my efficient little prompter. "Now for Bert: he'll be sure to say something about the 'ethics of the profession' when you begin to talk about his other client. But you must show him that this matter in which he is acting for you has nothing on the face of it to involve Mr. Griffin. Can you manage that?"

I said I thought I could; and then she hustled me into my overcoat and fairly dragged me to the door to start me on my way. Golly! the way she was standing by and taking hold was enough to put life into a dead man.

Oswald was alone in his office when I got there, and he sat still and listened without saying anything while I told him all the things I'd been keeping back. But, as Eva had prophesied, when I got through, he raised the question of "professional ethics."

"This man may be all the different kinds of villain you believe him to be, Jeff; but still——"

"I know," I broke in. "You're going to say that you've taken his retainer and committed yourself. We'll let that part of it go; also, we'll pass over the probability that he retained you solely for the purpose of tying *my* lawyer's hands. But it's just as Eva says: so far as you know, or as the evidence as at present developed goes to show, he doesn't appear at all in this matter of mine."

"That's so," he yielded. "But Mugridge is going to be a mighty hard nut to crack."

"That's up to you," I snapped. "He's a party to a bald swindle, and, crooked as he is, he's afraid of the law. You'll know better than anybody how to pull that gun on him."

"Maybe," he admitted, and as he said it an auto roared through the square, skidded halfway across the snowy street, and stopped

with a shrill shriek of the brakes at the office entrance. Ruddle had made a record run over a winter road from Higglestown, and there were still three-quarters of an hour to spare before Mugridge's bank would close for the day. One minute later Oswald had the unindorsed draft in his pocket and was hurrying around the block to the Middleboro National.

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT THE BRASS CASTING HELD.

I had a rather bad time of it waiting for Oswald to come back from the interview with Jasper Mugridge. Lacking the little girl's presence, and the bracing effect of her fine courage and enthusiasm, I slumped again, good and hard. Would Oswald succeed in tearing me loose from the bargain-and-sale entanglement, without the breaking of which I couldn't turn a single wheel? And if he should—if there should be a return to the "as you were" of yesterday—would we be any better off?

It looked mighty doubtful. With the "as you were" back in the saddle, the machinery of the law would begin grinding again, and I should lose the machine works in dead earnest, with a real deputy sheriff, this time, to serve the attachment papers. And, so far as anybody could see, the phantom fortune was just as far out of reach now as it had been in the beginning. I couldn't make a move without the lost papers conveying the right and title to uncle Jeffrey's "make-ready."

Slowly the time dragged on. Half past two came, and then a quarter to three. There was a little tin clock on Oswald's desk and I watched the minute hand climb with invisible hitchings to the hour. Still Oswald didn't show up. Had he weakened, allowing Mugridge to bully or bluff him? I knew Bert, up one side and down the other. He could make a stout fight in open court; I had seen and heard him do it. But could he stand up to this old money shark in the private office of the bank?

The suspense ended at last. At a quarter past three I heard Oswald's step in the corridor. When he came in he tossed a folded paper into my lap. The battle was won.

"It was the stiffest fight I ever had," he said, dropping into his chair. "If I hadn't made Mugridge believe we could prove a lot of things that we can't prove, he would have beaten me. But it convinced me of one thing, Jeff: you are right in your belief that there is big money at stake. I shall return Griffin's retainer to-morrow and tell him I can't act for him."

"Wait," I interposed. "I can't see the road a foot ahead of me yet, and if you break with him——"

"Mugridge will tell him," he cut in, anticipating what I was about to say—that Griffin would take the alarm and shove me still harder. "Besides, I want to be free to fight for you. Now that their plot has failed, they'll come down on you like a thousand of brick; strip you so bare that you won't have money enough to pay street-car fare. Then there is Eva's father to be considered. They'll push him to the limit when Griffin learns that he has lost out once for all with Eva."

It was all true; as true as gospel. And I had nothing to offer. For three mortal hours we threshed it out in that dingy little law office, Oswald and I, canvassing every possible means of getting on the track of the lost papers, and finding no helpful suggestion of any sort. It asked for a keener wit than either of us could dig up; and the wit was waiting—only we didn't know it.

At half past six Oswald went home and I crossed to Vignaux's to get a bite of dinner, first phoning Eva to tell her that the "as you were" had been restored, and that I'd be with her as soon as I'd had my dinner. On her part, she told me that her father had gone to Columbus on the afternoon train, and I was rather glad of that. I didn't want to meet father Harvey just then, when there wasn't even a corner ripped out of the curtain of gloom.

My dinner was a solitary affair and a hurried one; but for all that, at the end of it there was a little kick to keep me from stagnating, as you might say. It was just after the waiter had brought the black coffee that the dining-room screen doors bulged inward to admit a big, bearded man whom I had known well for a good few years; namely, John Becker, high sheriff of the county in which Higglestown paid its taxes. He came straight across to my table.

"Sorry to spoil your appetite, Jeff," he began, "but the law's the law. I've got to tie your little old shop up," and he handed me the notice of attachment—the real one, this time.

"You're not to blame; you can't help yourself, John," I said, as cheerfully as I could. "What am I to do with this?"

"Nothing; unless you want to turn it over to your lawyer. You acknowledge the service, I suppose?"

I said I did, and he made a note of it on his return blank. Then I made bold to ask a question.

"Who telephoned you to come after me, John?"

He grinned again, still more broadly.

"I ain't supposed to tell," he replied, "but I've got so little use for the old snipe that I don't mind. It was Mugridge."

I'd hardly needed to ask. I could easily figure the old shark grabbing for the telephone and shouting for long distance the minute Oswald's back was turned. But it made little difference. I'd got to the point where nothing made much difference any more, and I was even good-natured enough to make a dinner guest of Becker, telling him to eat heartily and give the house a good name, and excusing myself on the plea of an engagement after he had got fairly started in on the soup and fish.

I found Eva waiting for me when I reached the house in Decatur Street, which was something less than five minutes after I'd left Becker fortifying himself against the return drive to Higglestown. The minute we were before the fire in the little den room she wanted to be told all the happenings of the afternoon, paragraph by paragraph, so to speak, and I reeled them off for her.

"I've been thinking as hard as ever I could," she said, sitting as she had sat that other night, leaning forward in her chair with her round little chin in her hands. "I haven't had anything else to do, except to pack daddy's suit case for his Columbus trip."

"Have you worked out anything?" I asked.

"A few little tiny things. Tell me, Jeffy; aren't there always two keys to a safety-deposit box?"

"Why, sure!" I blurted out; "and not only to a bank box, but to any really good lock. But I never thought of that until this minute."

"That little piece of brass that we found in the electric furnace—have you got it with you?"

I had, and I fished it out. She took it, balancing it delicately on the end of a finger.

"Was it one key, or two of them, before it was melted? Is there any way to tell?"

"An easy way," I rejoined. "Have you a letter scale?"

There was one in the library and she fetched it. Luckily it was an accurate little machine, with weights and a pointer that would indicate the fractions of an ounce. I put the casting in one pan and the key to my Higglestown bank box in the other. The casting weighed more than the key; about twice as much, as we proved by adding other keys from my ring until the balance tilted.

"That disposes of one of the tiny thought things," she sighed half mournfully. "There were two keys melted down, instead of one. I wish we knew whether they were really safety-box keys or not."

"Why?—what makes you doubt it? Don't you remember the faint little fire photograph we saw on the asbestos block? That told the story."

"A key is a key," she insisted. "Just because it happens to be the same shape as a bank-box key doesn't make it one."

"But why shouldn't it be a bank-box key?"

"I suppose it should be. But, on the other hand, your uncle was such a—such a different person, you know; he wouldn't do the thing you'd suppose he'd do—wouldn't do anything that other people would."

"Can you shove it along any farther?" I asked eagerly.

"I'm not sure that I can. But mightn't he have foreseen that you, or somebody, would find the little electric switch in the front of the safe and trace out the wires? I think he took that much for granted, and if that is so, maybe he melted these keys in the furnace, just to add to the mystery and tangle things up that much worse. It sounds silly, now that I've said, doesn't it?"

"Never mind how it sounds. Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know that we can go anywhere; it's an awful mess. But if the keys that were melted down were not bank-box keys, then there needn't be any bank box, need there? Only everybody would think there was, and would go running around everywhere looking for the bank—and the box. Maybe that was what your uncle intended."

"I'm trying my darndest to keep up with you," I said, marveling at the way her nimble mind was skipping from one high

place to another in the quagmire of mystery.

"Besides that, I've been asking myself all afternoon if anybody—even such a—a different person as your uncle, could really work himself up to the point of actually destroying those papers. That's the alternative, you see; they are either hidden somewhere, or they are destroyed. I can't make myself believe that he would destroy them."

"Well?"

"If they are not destroyed, then they must be hidden. After that, I asked myself for the hundredth time—where? One answer to that I think I've found, Jeffy. It wouldn't be in a bank box, taken under an assumed name, in some distant city."

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Because, when he sent for you——"

"I see," I cut in. "When he sent for me he believed that there was a chance that I'd comply with his conditions. If I had done so, he would have put the fortune, or, at least, the means of getting it, into my hands. Is that where you landed?"

"That's it," she said simply.

"In that case, the papers would be somewhere within reach; somewhere in the old house, locked up in something to which this bit of brass was once the key—or the two keys."

"Now you've got it," she nodded. "That is as far as I could get."

It was a good long mile farther than anybody had gotten before; and the guess, if it were the right one, explained some other things—Mr. Hamish Griffin's explorations in the house with the red roof, for example. Griffin might be the strong-arm man for some bunch of New York speculators who were trying to grab off uncle Jeffrey's "corner," or he might be a plain "con" man working for his own pocket. But, agent or principal, one thing was perfectly clear; *he* believed that the answer to the puzzle was to be found in the house on the hill, and not in any distant-city bank vault. His midnight searching proved it.

While I was sorting all this out, Eva had picked up the key casting and was concentrating upon it as if she were trying to force it to tell its secret. Suddenly she jumped up and went to the reading table to hold the casting bottom-side up under a big reading glass that father Harvey used when his eyes were bothering him. Then:

"Jeffy!—come here!"

I got up to go and look over her shoulder. She had the glass focused accurately, and it brought out all the little irregularities of the casting bottom in strong exaggeration.

"Do you see it?" she breathed.

By Jove! I did. Traced upon the bottom of the casting was the clear outline of a key—the identical outline that the fire had transferred to the asbestos block! Being a metal worker, I knew instantly what that outline meant. Two keys, duplicates, had been placed, one on top of the other, in the little fire box. In the quick, fierce heat of the electric arc the top one had melted first, to run down and envelope the one underneath, and the flowing metal had short-circuited the current to cut it off before the melting was completed.

All the same, it was with no hope at all that I took out my pocketknife and began to pick at the brass. While the outline of the underlying key was perfect, I made no doubt but that it was fused solidly in the mass; that there was nothing left but the outline. Taking that view of it, I nearly blew up when, under the prying of the knife blade, the outer envelope began to peel off as solder peels from a greased surface. I could hear Eva's heart beating as I worked, but I don't believe she drew breath once until the perfect key, stripped of its fused envelope, lay in my hand.

"At last!" she gasped, sobbing out the words as if they were choking her. And then: "Is—is it a safety-box key, Jeffy?"

I snatched up the magnifying glass. Apart from the heat discoloration the key was unmarred. The name of the lock-making firm was faintly discernible on the side which had been the top as it lay in the furnace; but there was no identifying number.

"It is not," I said. "Safe-deposit boxes are numbered, and so are the keys."

"Then the lock that it opens is somewhere in that house—your house!" she burst out. "We didn't look carefully enough. Let's go and look again—now—this minute!"

Excited as I was myself over the resurrection of the key, I tried to dissuade her, telling her that we could make a more thorough search in daylight. But I might as well have saved my breath. You'll know how it was—if you've ever tried to hold a woman back when she had her head set upon doing something.

"All right," I yielded, at last. "But you

must wrap up good. It was snowing again when I came in."

She promised, and went on a breathless run to do it. Ten minutes later we were letting ourselves out quietly through the front door. Aunt Muriel hadn't been told that somebody was about to run off with her niece. Eva said it wasn't worth while to get her all stirred up and nervous, and it wasn't.

The storm which had been brewing all afternoon had apparently settled in to make a night of it. It wasn't a blizzard, this time. The temperature was hardly below freezing, and the snow was sifting down gently in big patchy flakes that looked as large as hen feathers as they eddied through the aureoles surrounding the street lights.

Owing to the sifting snow veil, we couldn't make out the shape of the blind-faced house until we reached the street end; but when we did see it there was a shock to jump out at us. The only window that had been left on the side fronting the street was that in the high roof gable; the one lighting the laboratory. And out of it came the sheen of a powerful electric lamp.

For a moment the sight of the lighted window stopped us. I knew perfectly well what was happening, and so, too, did Eva. Griffin had told Oswald that he wouldn't be back until the next morning, but he had either lied or bettered his schedule. Doubtless he hadn't seen Mugridge since his return, and so didn't know that the fraudulent bargain-and-sale of the previous night had been canceled. Hence he would say that he had a perfect right to light up his own house and ransack it as much as he pleased.

Once more he had beaten me to it.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT THE GRIFFIN BIRD FOUND.

"That will be Mr. Hamish Griffin," I said to Eva, "hunting for the same thing we were going to hunt for. We may as well go on back home."

"Go back?" she exclaimed—"and let him rob you?"

"I'll take you back and then go and dig up the town marshal. But even at that it's a question whether I can run this Griffin buzzard out without some sort of legal process. He will claim that he has bought the house, along with the other remnants, and I'll have to show that he hasn't."

"But, *Jeffy!*" she squealed; "by that time it will be too late! You've still got the door key, haven't you?"

"Sure."

"Then we must go in quietly and see what he is doing. You *mustn't* let him rob you—and take it lying down!"

I guess this was the little spur I needed.

"I'll go in," I agreed. "But I must take you home first. As likely as not there'll be another scrap."

But no, no, no; not any whatever. There wasn't a minute to be lost, she insisted. And there needn't be any fight, or, if there was, she could do the screaming for help; all this while she was trying to pull me toward the step flight through the stone sidewalk wall.

I gave in, of course; there was no more use trying to argue with her than there would have been in trying to stop the snow from coming down. Like a pair of burglars we crept up to the side door and let ourselves in. Unlike the night when we had made our first visit, there was no tomblike chill to greet us. Griffin had renewed the furnace fire, and had turned the heat on for the upper floors, so that he might take his time and ransack in comfort.

One little preliminary precaution I insisted upon. I made Eva wait in the dark dining room until I slipped down to the cellar and got one of my cot blankets. This I slashed in pieces with my knife and made into foot wrappings for both of us. I knew we'd never reach the attic in bare shoes without giving the alarm.

All sleuthed up that way, we made the stair climb in the dark. There were no lights on in the lower story, nor yet in the big chamber where uncle Jeffrey had died. Also, the attic was dark, save for a broad beam of light pouring through the open door of the laboratory. The clinking of hammer upon steel told us that somebody was at work in the lighted room, and a peep around the door jamb showed us a man in overalls and jumper hammering at a hole in the wall where the electric furnace was embedded. I had to look twice to make sure that it was Griffin; this because the overclothes and workman's cap changed him so completely from the dandified gentleman that Middleboro knew.

At first we couldn't make out what he was doing. We were too far away, and his back was toward us. Then we saw that he was cutting away the brickwork with a hammer

and chisel; going to it like a professional bousewrecker. What we needed was a better point of view, and just then I remembered the hole he had jimmied tbrough the partition on that other night when be was trying to trace the little switch wires.

Hand in hand we stole around to tbe chimney side of tbe gable. Light was coming through the broken-out hole, and wben we peeped in through the tangle of switches and electric wiring we could see a pair of gloved hands and what they were doing. The fire-brick bottom of tbe little furnace had been cut out, and the hammer-driven cold chisel was now gnawing into an underlayer of brickwork that was much softer, as if it had been lately mortared in.

The gloved hands—we couldn't see anything but his hands and arms—worked fast. Brick after brick came out, either whole or in pieces, and in a sbort while the chisel clinked through upon something that rang like metal. The gloved hands eagerly brushed the dust and chippings aside; then we saw what looked to be the top or side of an iron box buried, apparently, in the solid brickwork base of the furnace. A few minutes more of the hurried chipping and the box was laid bare; a small iron or steel chest about fifteen inches long and maybe a foot broad and deep.

As nearly as we could judge, Griffin was trying to free the box so that it could be lifted out. But seemingly that appealed to him as too slow a process, and he placed the cbisel edge against something that looked like a hasp lapped over the outer corner of the box. A blow of the bammer sent the hasp thing flying. It was the cover to a keyhole.

At this we got another shock. One of tbe gloved hands disappeared, and when it came back it was bare and the fingers were holding a key which, except that it was bright and shiny and new, was the twin brother to the one I had dug out of the little matrix of melted brass in father Harvey's den.

The key was slipped into the lock; it fitted and turned part way, and then stuck. Nervously, impatiently, the ungloved fingers worked with it, but still it stuck. We heard a gritting oath of disappointment, and then the hands and arms came through the breach in the laboratory wall and clamped themselves around the solid little cbest for the lift.

I think neither Eva nor I knew, at the moment, just what happened, or how. There was a blinking, crackling flash that filled the torn-out space with a light too vivid to be borne, the dull thud of a falling body, and tben a faint, sickening smell of burned flesh to come wafting up through the wrecked brickwork. Almost mechanically I flung an arm around Eva and rushed her away, my first thought being that the lightning flash had caught her. But wben I would have picked her up to run with her down the attic stair, sbe twisted herself free.

"I'm not hurt!" she gasped. Then: "The man inside—quick—he may be dying!"

We ran togetber to the laboratory door, and I made her wait a minute while I went in. Tbere was no need for haste. The scorched, blackened, half-naked thing on the floor was no longer a man to be helped; it was merely a human cinder. I went back to Eva, who stood sbaking like a leaf, just where I had left her.

"You mustn't come in; it's too horrible," I said.

"Is he—is he dead?" she whispered.

"Yes. He must have short-circuited that furnace installation in some way when he reached in to lift the box. He never knew wbat hurt him."

"What will you do?"

Of course, tbe first thing to do was to notify the authorities. But I didn't mean to leave tbe house—not for ten dead men—until we bad dug tbe secret out of that bricked-in iron chest to which we, and we only, had the opening key.

"Would you be afraid to stay here by yourself—for just a minute?" I asked.

"Not if you won't be l-long," she shuddered.

I fled down the attic stair and into one of the bedrooms to snatch a pair of blankets. Hurrying back to tbe laboratory, I dragged the poor human cinder aside and covered it decently. When I went to get her, the little girl gave one shivering look at the blanketed figure; but after that she was her own nervy self again.

I was careful not to take any chances on the death trap. My trade made me more or less familiar with electric installations, and I looked for, and soon found, tbe switch that cut tbe current entirely out of the furnace wiring. Griffin's key, one be had doubtless had some skillful locksmith make from the fire photograph on the asbestos block, and which, of course, couldn't be made ac-

curately from such an indefinite pattern, was still in the lock.

I took the key out and tried my own. There was a complicated clicking of bolts, and I lifted the lid. The box contained a single thick file of papers. I ran over the docketings, made in my uncle's crabbed handwriting hastily. The papers were bills of sale, options, contracts with importers, agreements to buy and hold. And Brazil nuts were the only commodity named in them. At the top of the file there was a single-sheet summary, also in uncle Jeffrey's handwriting. I glanced at the footing of the column of figures and then showed it to Eva; pointed to it and saw her catch her breath and take her lip between her teeth. There was no wonder. The total was one million seven hundred and thirty-four thousand four hundred and fifty-six dollars and fifty-four cents.

"That is what he spent in closing the market," I said. "Nobody knows what the nuts will be worth now; but if we don't get anything more than the investment, we should worry and go and crack nuts for ourselves. Let's get out of here."

We left the lights on; it seemed too gruesome to think of leaving that blanketed figure alone in the dark. I've a notion that my dear girl didn't get a good, full breath—not what could be called one—until we were out in the soft white snowstorm. At the sidewalk steps she gave one half-frightened glance up at the lighted gable window.

"To think that *that* was the end of all his scheming!" she shuddered and after this she didn't speak again until the home street corner was in sight. Then she said:

"What will you do with it, Jeffy?"

"Meaning the fortune?—first, I'll marry you."

"Mph—I suppose you're perfectly certain of that?" she shot back, with a return of the girlish nippiness that I was mighty glad to see. "But besides?"

"Besides, we'll put your daddy out of his misery and let him build additions to his pipe works all over North Middleboro, if he wants to."

"That's all for other people, so far. What will you do for yourself?"

"Gosh! I don't know, Eva; just now I can't count above ten. What I'd like to do would be to start a bank, a sure-for-certain honest bank, and run old Jasper Mugridge out of business. Maybe I shall, one of these fine days."

Silence again until we stood together on the home porch.

"I mustn't go in with you, dear," I said. "I've got to chase around and find Oswald and the coroner, and I don't know who-all else."

Suddenly two fur-covered arms went around my neck and a pair of warm lips gave me half a dozen quick, jabbing little kisses.

"Listen, big boy—I w-wouldn't have married him if all three of us were going to be turned out in the street the next minute! You've known that all along, haven't you, Jeffy, dear?"

"Sure I have!" I burbled; and then I pulled the wheeze that all scared-up lovers have pulled since the world began—and believed it, too. "Don't you worry a thirty-second of an inch. That Griffin bird hasn't cost me a single minute's sleep on that score since I first heard his name mentioned. Good night, honey jug; don't tell anybody you were with me up yonder, and then nobody will know, and you won't have to be dragged before the coroner's jury." And with that I plugged out through the storm to find Bert Oswald.

I guess that'll be about all; all but a few little loose odds and ends. Of course, there was a nine-days' wonder in sleepy old Middleboro when the facts—or what the gossips took for the facts—came out; only I think a good half of the talkers never did get things quite straight. Some still had it that Griffin was what he had claimed to be, though they were rather put to it to account for the more or less mysterious circumstances of his death. Others hinted darkly at a "ring" of criminals, formed for the purpose of getting away with the Grimsby fortune.

As not infrequently happens, the truth lay between these two extremes. Oswald and I found out by financing a small campaign of investigation. Griffin, it appeared, was a member of a brokerage firm in New York; an outfit with an exceedingly shady reputation. In some way, which was never satisfactorily explained, he had surprised uncle Jeffrey's secret, and had come to Middleboro at the news of my uncle's illness to try to break in for a share of the spoils.

His tentative offer to lift father Harvey out of the debt swamp was doubtless condi-

tioned—as to the possibility of it, I mean—upon the success of his raid upon the old fad maker's fortune. He had no money of his own. As we afterward learned, he had flimflammed old Jasper Mugridge into putting up the twenty-five thousand dollars which was to have disposed of me and my claim.

How Griffin had figured out the problem of the keys and the location of the bricked-in strong box, was also never explained. But to the up-to-the-minute crook there are few problems of that nature that can't be solved, I guess.

As to the fortune itself, the "corner" in Brazil nuts—eat one after each meal and you'll never be a dyspeptic—ridiculous as it may seem upon the face of it, proved to be all that uncle Jeffrey prophesied it would be—and more. By whatever means he had employed, the fad germ had been broadly scattered and well harrowed in. Right from the jump, the little girl and I took a solemn oath that we wouldn't be profiteers; but the market had already sailed up into the clouds and we couldn't have pulled it down with a derrick! The old fad maker had done his work well. For a time, Brazil-nut eating was the "latest" fad, the newest wrinkle, and no table setting, however humble and lowly, was complete without its dish of "niggertoes."

We did our honest best. Oswald, acting now as my business manager, as well as my lawyer, pitched the hoarded stocks into the trade as fast as they could be shipped and handled; but the more we sold, the bigger the demand grew. Zowie! it was like taking money from an armless blind man!

Early in May Eva and I ran away from the golden shower—on our wedding trip. We tried to find a place where the nuts had never been heard of; and we did: an isolated, off-the-railroad town in the North Georgia mountains; a town that had once been the metropolis of the first gold excitement the nation had ever known—and has since been, for two-thirds of a century, lost and forgotten.

There was a delightful climate, picturesque Blue Ridge scenery to burn, and a good, old-fashioned country hotel, with chicken every day for dinner, and no nuts on the table. But the very first day the old Southern colonel proprietor, who sat at the head of his own board and served it family fashion, passed and urged upon us a heaping dish of white-stemmed celery—the one imported luxury on a table that was otherwise bountifully and sufficiently supplied from the local markets with everything that hungry heart could wish.

"He'p yo'self, Mistuh Burrell—an' you, too, madam. You should eat celery liberally, suh. Why, it was only yestudday I read in the Gainesville papuh that celery is the only vegetable in common use that cah'ies free iodine, an' if yo'll eat enough of it, yo'll neveh have heart trouble—I did, for a fact, suh!"

I looked at Eva and she looked at me, and we both grinned.

"It's no use trying to dodge," she whispered. "It's a fad-ruled world, and I suppose we've got to live in it."

And we each took a piece of celery.

The next complete novel will be "The Detour" a story of the Detroit automobile industry, by L. H. Robbins

EVERY ONE SHOULD LEARN TO SWIM

AMERICANS know too little about self-preservation on the water. According to reliable statistics for the year 1917, accidental drownings cost the lives of five thousand five hundred and fifty people. This was more than double the number of fatalities from accidents and injuries received in all the mines in the United States. It was considerably more than double the deaths caused by street-car accidents. It was only one thousand two hundred and seventy-four less than all the people killed in automobile accidents. It more than doubled all the deaths caused by machinery accidents of every kind. It emphasizes the fact that every child should be taught to swim —swim well and with endurance. It is true that many good swimmers are drowned, because they become overconfident and too often take needless risks, but the proportion of those unable to swim who meet death in the water is vastly in excess of the number of good swimmers who drown.

An Even Break

By Henry Herbert Knibbs

Author of "The Silent Watcher," "The Ridin' Kid from Powder River," Etc.

Knibbs knows his people "from the ground up," and you feel that he loves them, with all their faults. Such gun-play as is described here would seem, on the surface, reprehensible, but not when you understand it from the peculiar viewpoint of the men with the guns

HE drifted into the rancho on a mighty sorry-looking cayuse, a ribby, dejected animal that had evidently been worn down on some long journey. From the rancho-house window I saw him stop at the big gate, unsnap the chain, peer toward the house, and then, with that easy, indifferent swing, mount and ride up to the portal. It happened that I was alone. He dismounted as I opened the door.

"Put him in the corral," I said as I stepped out. "There's alfalfa and grain in the shed, there."

My chance guest nodded and, although it was but a few yards to the corral, he again mounted, rode over, and presently came stumping back, his frayed leather chaps swinging to his jerky walk.

"Shake your chaps and make yourself comfortable. I was just going to rustle some grub."

The tall one, whose name was "Sliver" and nothing more, from all that I could learn, was gazing at some of my outland plunder in the living room. I had a chance to study him. He was over six feet, rawboned, straight as a plumb line, eagle-featured, and with hair of a lively red. His Stetson had seen much weather, and the back of his neck was eloquent of years in the sun and wind. He was not lovely to look at, but his eyes were clear and frank. His drawl savored of Texas, and his manner, of one who was not looking for trouble, but expected it.

"I'm a stranger up this-away," he informed me, turning and eying me steadily.

"Good! So am I. I lease this ranch occasionally, just to get away from folks. Glad you came in. It's twenty miles to the nearest neighbor, and it's twenty minutes to six."

His eyes twinkled. "I figured about that," he said, unsnapping his chaps and hanging them next to my Spanish bridle. "That's a smilin' fine headstall! Must be worth mebby a hundred dollars?"

I nodded. "Came from down Sonora way, in a hurry," I stated.

Again his eyes twinkled. "It ain't got nothin' on me," he said slowly.

"Now, *you* rode in right easy and cool," I said.

"I always do, neighbor." He was about to say something else when he stiffened, stepped toward a photograph over the fireplace, gazed at it silently for a while and then turned to me. "You know Buck?" he asked casually.

"Do *you?*"

"I shore do! He's from my State. Me and Buck——"

"Excuse me. Keep it till after chuck. I'll punch up some hot bread, and I've got some ham, and some fresh eggs and a skillet full of potatoes ready to fry, and some——"

"Don't waste yore time talkin'," he said and he actually smiled. "I et onct, yesterday."

"Great Scott! All right. Tobacco and papers on the table. Help yourself. And say, right back of you, in the bookcase—— No, the next door, the little one. That's it. Need any help?"

"And yore nearest neighbor is twenty mile!" he ejaculated as he wiped his mouth with his big, bony hand. "Say, I reckon you been somewhere yourself."

"Come on out in the kitchen—yes, fetch it along with you if you like—and tell me about Buck. The son of a gun hasn't written to me for months. And I'll bet he isn't getting any of that, where he is now."

"Is Buck daid?" queried the big Texan, blinking humorously.

"No. I would have heard."

"Then he's gettin' it," he drawled.

"Well, suppose he were dead."

"Then he'd be wantin' it worse than he ever did," stated the Texan.

"I guess you know him."

"Know him. Why, neighbor, me and Buck has had some pow'ful warm times together. Last time——" The Texan jerked round as some one knocked. I saw his big, bony fist clenched under his faded shirt. "It's my neighbor, with the mail. It's all right."

The Texan relaxed. I stepped outside and exchanged a word or two with Smalley, the rancher up Round Butte way, thanked him for my mail and papers, and stepped back into the kitchen.

My guest was rolling a cigarette—thoughtfully. "Do you-all have many visitors down thisaway?" he asked.

"You are the first in a week. No telling."

"So you an' Buck has been pals?" he asked casually, and I did not get his under meaning right then.

"Worse than that. We have been pinched—together—for trying to imitate Mr. de Palma, only all we got out of the car was seventy-five, and a fine."

"Then you must be pals. I'm right glad."

Meanwhile, I had the supper under way. The Texan, or Sliver, as I learned to call him, smoked, sitting with one gaunt knee over the other, and slowly swinging his leg. He seemed to be thinking, so I did not urge him to talk about Buck. That would come later.

It was a delight to see him replenish his inner man. I knew just about how he had felt when he rode up; and the cat's menu was mighty slim that night.

After supper he grabbed up a towel, and we shuffled the dishes away inconsequently, as men do when there is no feminine eye about.

We stepped into the living room. I started a fire and gestured toward a comfortable chair.

"I'll go see how my hoss is makin' it," said Sliver. "I didn't pull his saddle—yet." And Silver made a peculiar gesture with his left hand, an old and familiar code signal known to Buck and myself.

"Is it as bad as that?" I queried.

"It ain't, neighbor, but it might be, most any minute. I ain't exactly expectin' visitors, but I cain't tell."

I got up from before the fireplace and put on my Mackinaw and hat. "I'll go along with you. There's another corral, back over the hill."

Again Sliver's blue eyes twinkled appreciatively. "Over the hill is right!"

I suppose I could have told him to vamose. And, possibly, he would have left. Then again he might have yanked his gun from that shoulder holster and told *me* to vamose. And, unquestionably, I should have done so. I preferred to stay at the ranch and listen to Sliver. He had not said that he was outlaw, although I knew he was. Then, he needed food and rest, as did his horse. If he was willing to trust me and take a chance, why, I was willing to trust him and take another.

We packed some hay up to the old corral, way back in the brush, and we packed it in gunny sacks, carefully, that we would leave no trail. Sliver pulled his saddle and hid it in the bushes. We jogged down the hill and into the house.

I showed Sliver an upper room, in the loft, where I had a cot bed and some blankets. Then we settled down by the fire to chat about Sonora, the border, Texas, and men we had known in the old days, and among them Buck, of whom Sliver seemed to know much.

The more Sliver talked about Buck the more I was assured that he knew Buck very well—intimately. Yet I had never heard Buck mention Sliver's name, nor describe him. This seemed strange, because Buck never failed to describe—and imitate cleverly for my benefit any especially notable or peculiar individual whom he had met. We had spent days, weeks, together in Buck's shack in Verdugo Cañon retailing incident and circumstance to each other, swapping names of old-timers, telling yarns about the Indians, planning trips into the hills, pawing over outfits and Indian plunder—in other words, Buck and I were pals supreme.

And this Slivery gentleman, this upstanding six feet of raw bone and sinew, who knew Buck so well, had never been mentioned to me. There was a kink in the rope, somewhere, and a wet, hard-kinked rope if left alone, out in the sun, will virtually unkink itself. I did not ask any questions. Presently, for the sake of curiosity, I ventured the statement that Buck was the quickest man with a six-shooter that I had ever seen. Sliver smiled—a mild, semisarcastic

smile. "You ain't choused around the border much, I take it," he said, and as he said it, it implied a question and an assertion.

"No. But I do know one or two old-timers pretty well." And I mentioned the names of two or three notable smoke-wagon experts.

My guest nodded. "Yep! But Buck met a faster man than he was, onct. Did he ever tell you?"

"Not that I recall it now."

"Uh-uh? Well, that's natural. A man is foolish to advertise hisself, that-away."

I realized that here was another kink in the rope. Sliver had told me much about Buck, his peculiarities of manner and speech, his habits, and his adventures along the border—on both sides of it. And not until my lank friend asked me casually if I knew just where Buck was bedding down at the present time, did I suspect that he had been trying to lead me to a show-down. As the game did not seem to be for very high stakes, I laid my hand on the table, so to speak. "Buck is in Albuquerque, or was, a short time ago. A friend of mine had a letter from him last week. The letter was postmarked Albuquerque."

For some unknown reason, Sliver seemed relieved. He rolled a cigarette, leaned forward and lighted it at the fire. As he did so his shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, opened far enough for me to see the service-worn butt of a gun, hung under his arm. Of course, I had known all along that he packed his gun there, but the actual sight of it set me thinking. I gazed at the fire. I grew drowsy. Presently I jerked wide awake. A slow, drawling voice told me to sit still, just as I was; and as I turned my head I looked into the shiny muzzle of a short-barreled forty-five. "So you-all claim to be a friend of Buck's, eh? No—you needn't to put up yore hands—jest sit still."

"Why, yes! What's the idea?"

"Nothin'," drawled the Texan. "I jest wanted to find out."

"Well, you take a hell of a friendly way of finding out!" I told him, as the prickling died down in the back of my neck.

The Texan laughed. He slipped his gun out of sight and stretched his long legs till his boot heels were almost in the fireplace. "Shucks, neighbor! I got my answer."

"Well, I hope you feel better. I'd never pull a gun on a man unless I meant business."

"Don't blame you for bein' sore." And Sliver looked me in the eye. He smiled, but his gaze was direct and hard. I knew what was coming before he spoke. "Don't go to bed with any little ole notion that I wa'n't meanin' business when I drawed on you." And I saw his gaze travel swiftly toward the wall of the living room. Then I understood. Among the odds and ends picked up on devious trails was a deputy United States marshal's badge that I had stuck up on the wall beside the gun of a once-famous annihilator of bad men.

"Oh, that? Don't worry. I never sported that badge."

"No? Well, I take your word for it. But a man cain't always tell. And yo're a friend of Buck's, all right."

"Glad you're satisfied on that point."

"Yes," he drawled. "I got to be, afore I kin sleep good."

"How about me?"

Sliver chuckled. "Neighbor, if I'd 'a' wanted anything around here, pow'ful bad, I reckon I'd 'a' took it quite a spell back. I had more'n one chanct."

"A horse, for instance."

"Yes, a hoss. Mine's rode down."

"All right. We'll forget that gun play. But I won't pretend that I liked it. And speaking of chances, if you had happened to look on the shelf by the stove you would have seen a gun there, back of the coffee can. And you had your back turned toward me more than once when I was rustling grub."

Sliver nodded. "Yes—that's right!" And his smile seemed to indicate something beneath the mere assertion.

"Well, what about it, then?"

"Oh, nothin'."

He spoke slowly, but his hand moved like the stroke of a rattler as he whipped a gun from the waistband of his overalls, beneath the corner of his vest and handed to me my own six-shooter, butt first. "Now you got the drop," he chuckled.

I laid the gun on the table and turned toward him. "You must be in bad, somewhere. You don't seem to be taking any chances, except to trust me."

Sliver ran his bony fingers through his long, red hair until it stood up like a flame. "Why—no. I cain't take chances, reg'lar. A man's got to, sometimes. But *you* ain't takin' none." And he thrust out his hand in friendship. I hesitated. Then we shook hands. He rose and stretched. "Sometimes

I got to do things I ain't honin' to do. You see, I don't take a whole lot of stock in what a man says to me. It's the way he says it, and the way he acts, that counts. Most any man kin bluff with words. He's practicin' talkin' all his life. But mighty few men kin bluff by actions. Some kin—but mighty few. You knowed I packed a gun, when that neighbor of yourn come with the mail. You seen me go for it. But when I reached for the fire, a spell back, and you seen my gun, you got to thinkin'. And you wa'n't thinkin' like you was when I first come in. You——"

"But hold on! How did you get that?"

"Shucks, man, it was leakin' out of yore pores—like sweat."

"What? That I was afraid of you?"

"Why—no! You wa'n't scared. But you was thinkin' hard. Now jest suppose I was goin' up ag'inst a killer who had set to hang my hide on the wire. I meets this yere killer in some little ole town in Texas, mebby. I meets him, say, where he is drinkin' at the bar. He is curious to size me up. I ain't expectin' he's goin' to draw and shoot me down the first minute. If he's quick—and most killers is—he is goin' to do some quick thinkin'—kind of plan, mebby, how he kin git me talkin', or doin' somethin' that will give him his excuse to draw and shoot. Mebby he is a mite quicker'n me with his gun. Mebby I'm a mite quicker'n him. Each of us is playin' for the other fella's lead—to git that half-second jump on the other. Words is nothin', then. Jest like cards, in a game of poker. They is plenty cards, and they mean somethin', but it's a fella's brains that wins or loses the game. It ain't the cards—barrin' luck. But only a fool builds on luck. Well, I called yore hand, and I seen you wa'n't bluffin'. Now Buck and me played a game, onct—back in a Juarez bar, when Buck advises the railbirds to step back and see a man cough himself to death——"

From far down the hard road came the faint patter of horses—horses that had been running and were now moving under curb, but with the desire to run still in their legs. And from the sound it was evident that there were many horses. I glanced at Sliver. He glanced at the trapdoor to the loft bedroom. I nodded.

"I take that chanct," he said, and stretching his long arms, he turned the button and dropped the door. Then he stepped to the wall, took his chaps and hat from their pegs, glanced round the room, and tossed his things into the loft. He jumped and grabbed the edge of the opening and drew himself up. I stepped on a chair, closed the trapdoor and fastened it. I could hear the impatient stamping of the horses, evidently waiting until the ranch gate was unfastened.

"There's a hasp on this door. I'm going to slip a padlock in it and lock it."

"All right, neighbor," came from above. Then: "There's that bottle—and two glasses on the table."

I stepped to the kitchen and put the extra glass on the pantry shelf. "All snug!" I said.

Sliver did not say anything in acknowledgment. But I thought I could picture him, crouching near the edge of the trapdoor—listening; and, perhaps, fingering the butt of that gun beneath his arm.

Well, things had been rather dull at the ranch for quite a while. It was a sort of relief to have something to think about. And I had.

Naturally I interpreted the approaching visitors as a sheriff's posse—not altogether because I was harboring a questionable character, but because the visitors were coming in number, and not singly as occasional punchers did. Then, if it was the sheriff, and he wishel to see me, he would come in a machine, swiftly; and in the sunlight—not late in the evening. As it was, I would be asked questions, watched, possibly suspected, until I had proven that I knew nothing of a tall, raw-boned, red-headed rider, who was last seen by some rancher headed my way on a played-out pony. I anticipated a brisk debate, and I wondered how long I could hold up my end of it without spilling the well-known frijoles.

Boot heels clumped on the portal floor; and some one knocked.

I laid my magazine on the table, face down, at the place where I had *not* been reading, and yawning frankly, so to speak, I stepped lazily to the door. "Come in, Smalley! Aren't you hitting the home trail rather late?"

And I rubbed my eyes and yawned again.

"Sorry to disturb you," said a chief deputy. "But I'd like to see you a minute."

"Come on in! Oh, you're not alone! Well, all of you come in. I guess I have enough left to go around."

One of the posse laughed, and three booted

and spurred riders stepped in. But there had been more than three horses in that cavalcade we had heard on the road. Naturally, the other men were stationed about the yard. Some one said once, anent a scrap, that he who hits first has the battle half won. This wasn't a scrap and I didn't intend that it should develop into one. That long-geared hombre in the loft was altogether too handy with a gun to risk a dispute. Besides, I did not want to get my living room shot up and splintered and generally demolished. So I hit out.

"Here's the bottle—and I'll get glasses. Let's see—three of you."

"Make it four of us," suggested a deputy facetiously.

"All right. Did any of you happen to fetch my mail along?"

"Why—no. Plumb forgot it."

"That's all right. Here! Now take your medicine and die happy. It's a mighty cold night."

"It sure is. Say, you didn't see a——"

"Oh, yes! Forgot the tobacco and papers, and here are some cigars. Help yourselves, boys. Wait a minute! Pull up to the fire. I'll stir it up. I was half asleep when you rode in. Did you see this article about the cattlemen's convention in Albuquerque? They had a ball—real, old-timer's gallop—worth reading about. And I see State Senator Sam Bolton led the grand march. Sam is a wise bird—he's a fat bird, but wise. But here I am, rambling along like a Sunday flivver and you boys aren't here just because you like to hear me talk. What in thunder are you riding so late for? Of course, I'm mighty glad you stopped by. My latchstring is always out to the law, and as long as that bottle holds out, there's no reason why we should part enemies."

"Why, we're lookin' for a guy. Long, red-headed Texas gent that is wanted in four States."

"Wanted a whole lot, eh?"

"He sure is."

"Well, help yourselves to fresh horses, if you need 'em. Or if you want to bunk here, just throw your stock into the corral and feed them and make yourselves to home. What is the Texas man wanted for, if you don't mind telling me?"

The chief deputy, in view of his superior office, I suppose, poured himself another half tumbler and downed it. "Why, from what the boss says, this guy is wanted in Texas for a killing, in Arizona for hoss stealing, in New Mexico for cattle rustling, and in California for the reward. Brown's folks, down at the Bend, said a guy answering his description stopped by and asked for some chuck long about noon to-day. Thought mebby——"

"And Brown turned him down, eh?"

"You seen Brown to-day?"

"No. I merely surmised——"

"Then how did you know Brown's folks turned him down?"

"I didn't, till you just told me. I guessed at it. Now, if he had ridden in here I would have fed him and told him to make himself at home. Boys, I don't care what a man has done, so long as he hasn't murdered his family or poisoned a dog, when that man is hungry—real, honest-to-gosh hungry. I have been there. As I said, if he had ridden in here hungry, and had not tried to stick me up I would have fed him, even if the law censured me for it. And I imagine any of you would have done the same."

"Why, sure? Now, we didn't figure he would be fool enough to ride in here in the daylight and set down for jest who he was. But we wanted to make sure. If you don't mind we'll look around."

Here was where I could have made a mistake by being too eager to have my premises searched. So I hesitated, frowned, and I didn't have to pretend that I did not want my place searched on mere suspicion. "Why, go ahead. Only I thought you boys knew me well enough to take it for granted that I am not in the habit of harboring criminals. As I said, I am for the law, every time, when the law has the least semblance of justice. Go ahead, boys. You might begin with that cupboard above the bookcase. There's a fresh bottle in there and this one is about empty." They caught the sarcasm, all right.

"We didn't come here to drink *all* your liquor," said the chief deputy. " 'Course, a little snifter goes good, 'specially on a night like this. But we telephoned out to Smalley's and he said nobody had rode past his place that he knowed of to-day. Said he didn't see no one comin' from town when he drove home. And Brown's folks seen this guy ridin' this way, about noon."

"There's a lot of open country between here and Brown's, and between here and Smalley's."

"Yes. But the road's fenced, clear through."

"That's right. Well, go ahead and search, boys."

They searched, carefully. I proffered lanterns and they spent some time searching the outbuildings. I heard my pinto snort as they entered the corral. I had wanted to tell them that it was no trick to pull several lengths of fence wire, jockey a horse over it by standing on the wire, and then set the staples again—but that would have been overplaying my hand. And, of course, they would have asserted that the tracks would show. To which I would have replied that they had not apparently looked for tracks beyond my place. And this would have entangled me in an argument, and arguments are full of pitfalls. I felt reasonably certain that they would not ask me the direct question now: had I seen the tall, raw-boned Texan, or did I know where he was? Their chance to ask that had been smothered. They were on their own. But if they found the played-out horse in the upper corral, I would have to do some tall and magnificent explaining. Or, no. A man could easily ride in to the ranch from the south, through the brush, corral his horse and hide out, and I would know nothing about it. He would have some five hundred acres to prowl about, without being seen from the ranch house.

Then they came back. As the chief deputy entered he happened to see the trapdoor to the loft, and the padlock.

"We didn't look up there," he said tentatively.

"Oh, my storeroom. Well, go ahead and look. But you may take my word for it, that trapdoor has not been unlocked since I locked it. But here is the key. No, that's the key to the toolroom. Wait a minute. I have that key somewhere. I don't use it often. I'll find it. I used to keep it on the shelf, here, over the fireplace. Yes, here it is." And I proffered the key to the chief deputy.

"Why—that's all right. I'll take your word for it that it's been locked for quite a spell."

"I didn't say that. It *seems* quite a while to me. I can't say just how long it has been locked, to the minute." And I grinned.

"That's all right. I reckon you wouldn't go boostin' no outlaw up into that loft, nohow."

"You bet I wouldn't! If an outlaw happened along and wanted to get up there real bad, it would be up to him to climb."

"A tall fella could almost reach that door with his hands," suggested a member of the posse. And he measured the distance with his eye.

"Yes. An active man, six feet or over, could jump and catch the edge and pull himself up—lock the door and go to sleep with a clear conscience. Which reminds me. If you boys are not riding any farther to-night, just make yourselves comfortable here. There's a spare bed in the other room and the couch here, and I have my own bed. It's a mighty cold night."

"They's three of us outside, waitin'," said the chief.

I was wondering how much longer the chief deputy would keep them waiting in the cold.

"The deuce! Why didn't you call 'em in?" I asked.

"Well, you know how it is. We wern't taking any chances."

"No, I don't just know how it is. I have never had a posse lay for me. But I see the wisdom of your plan. You had better call the rest of the boys in to have something."

"Well, if you don't mind."

The boys came in, cold and stiff-featured. They warmed their hands at the fire. They "had something." They suggested briefly that their partners had been a long time searching my house. Finally they all departed with many assurances of good will, and an apology from the chief deputy for having bothered me. It was just midnight when they left.

In my discussion with the posse I had felt warm, too warm. Now I realized that the fire had died down, that the night was actually cold. I heard the diminishing cadence of hoofbeats; then the voice of my guest. "I reckon I'll come down and git warm."

"Don't talk!" I warned him. "There may be some one stationed outside."

"I reckon they ain't. I watched 'em, through this yere ventilator. Six rode in and six rode out."

"All right."

I unlocked the trapdoor and Sliver dropped to the floor. "Say, neighbor, you ain't a lawyer, by any chanct?"

"Thank you, no. Where did you get that idea?"

"Listenin' to your little ole talk. You sure dodged the loop, every throw."

"Well, I tried to keep them interested in

everyday things. It's a wonder you are awake, after your ride. You don't seem the least bit sleepy."

I could see that Sliver thought I was joking. I was merely talking at random, to relieve my feelings. Sliver shook his head.

"Not yet. But I reckon I kin sleep pretty soon. What I come down for was to tell you about Buck, and the man what throwed a faster gun than he did onct. That posse kind of interrupted the talk."

"Suits me fine! Take that easy-chair. I'll get some life into that fire. Do you feel like taking a little stimulant—er—after your close shave?"

"No, thanks, neighbor. I only go jest so far with that stuff. But I was dyin' for a smoke."

While he made his cigarette I asked him what he intended to do when he left me.

"Keep a-goin'. I cain't do much else."

"But one of these days somebody will get you, sure. You can't hide out long in California, unless you take to the desert."

"I'm headed that away, neighbor. I'll git there."

"Hope you do. You were telling me that Buck was in a saloon in Juarez, and that he told the men along the rail to step back and watch a man cough himself to death and——"

"That's right. Buck was in the Ranger service, them days. I was in that saloon myself. I seen it all, only——"

Sliver hesitated, turned his head, and then looked at me. I heard it, too; the soft plod of a horse coming up the road from the ranch gate to the house. "One of 'em comin' back," he whispered. He listened again. The sound of hoofs was louder. "Hell!" said Sliver. "Jest seems I cain't git that story about Buck out of my system." And he reached up and unfastened the trapdoor.

"They'll look up there this time, sure," I said.

"Nope. If they was goin' to look, they'd 'a' looked first off." And he swung himself up and disappeared. I stepped to a chair, shoved the door up—and remembered the lock, which I had laid on the mantel when Sliver descended. As I hooked the lock in the hasp Sliver's muffled voice came to me: "The fella that Buck was goin' to make cough himself to death was me. My lungs is good yet."

As I stepped from the chair I heard a light knock at the door—a knock that I knew. The door swung open and in stepped —not a member of the posse, returning for something he had left behind, or returning to make further search of my premises, but Buck himself, smiling, quick, friendly. He was in ordinary clothing—not dressed for riding—save that he wore spurs and a Stetson.

"Hello, old-timer!" he cried, stepping in and shaking hands. "Didn't expect to find you up, but I saw a light and rode right in."

"You usually do, Buck, any old time. Tell me what I can do for you while we turn your horse into the corral."

"Nothing doing! I'll take care of him. It's cold—and I haven't got warm yet, so you stay right by your stick fire a minute."

And Buck was out and leading his horse across the yard.

I was glad to see Buck. We had much to talk about. It had been rather lonesome at the ranch—and Buck always knew the latest good story. "The fella that Buck was goin' to make cough himself to death, was me! My lungs is good yet——"

I could almost hear the words, as Sliver had uttered them. I knew a little bit about Sliver—and a whole lot about Buck. Here I was with them both on my hands—two fast guns—and an unsettled quarrel in between. It promised to be a red-letter night. Why, as things now stood, the posse had been a diluted joke. No doubt Buck would stay at the ranch two or three days—and there was Sliver locked in the loft. It looked as though I would have to pick posies for some one in the near future. But, perhaps, I could get Sliver out before Buck came back from the corral. I knew that Buck would spend some time attending to his horse nad hanging his saddle in the stable. I jumped to the chair, unlocked the trapdoor, and was about to turn the button and speak to Sliver, when Buck stepped in softly—all those chaps who have forgathered with the Indians can walk quietly, I have noticed—and still smiling, asked me if I was going up after my private stock, or some extra blankets. "Bud," he said, "you look like you were robbing your own safe—honest you do!"

"I've changed my mind. Pull up to the fire and I'll get you an internal foot warmer in a minute. How is everything?"

Buck settled himself in front of the fire, scratched his chin, gazed at the floor a second or two and then looked up. "Well, fair.

I had to come over to California on business, and I thought I'd look you up."

"Mighty explicit, as usual. Then you didn't come over to see me, this trip?"

"I'm here, and looking at you."

"Well, I'm glad you are, and I don't care a whoop what your business is. Where did you steal the horse?"

"S-s-s-h! I might steal a good horse. I rented that bird. And, say—met a posse riding toward town. They kind of spread out and then closed in and asked me who I was. Told 'em I was a horse thief on my way down to call on you—so they let me come along."

"Thanks. But the boys are out after some one, so I hear."

"I'd say so, or they wouldn't be chousing around on a night like this. Got in at two this afternoon, and I've been getting here ever since. How are things with you?"

"Pretty good. It was rather dull—family is away—until this evening. Will you join me?"

"Will I? Well, pardner——"

Buck sat with his glass halfway to his lips when the trapdoor dropped with a soft swish and swung back and forth. I jumped up. Buck gazed at the trapdoor, then at the glass in his hand. "That thing will drop some day and brain you, pardner. Why don't you lock it? There's a hasp on it."

"I must have turned the button too far around, when you came in, just now. I'll attend to it right now."

"You sit still, neighbor," said a voice.

And—"Buck, you set still, likewise."

Buck, still smiling, sat with his glass in his hand. His eyes were not smiling, however. I saw him glance toward the opening above. Then: "All right. You got the drop. But, say, Yardlaw, I don't want to hold this drink so far from its natural home, all night."

"Take yore drink, Buck, and take it quick."

"And you?" said Buck, nodding toward me. "It's a long time since we had one together."

I could see the fine sweat start on Buck's forehead as he raised his glass. And as he gazed at me over the rim of it, I saw a peculiar expression in his eyes. They questioned me. Why had I harbored an outlaw, and his enemy?

There was no fine sweat on my forehead, but, rather, I felt as if a cold band of metal were drawn round my head. My hand trembled as I raised my glass. Buck still smiled, but I took no stock in that. Then Buck's hand, compact, slender, jumped to his armpit. Like a single shot the two guns roared. A sprinkle of wet glass flew up and was sprayed over the table. But Buck was not there. With a backward leap he was in the corner of the room, out of range of that black opening in the ceiling. "Buck! Don't shoot! Wait! It's——"

"I guess I got him," said Buck.

"I ain't coughin' any," said the voice of Sliver.

"Then come down and shoot it out," said Buck. "But you want to come a-smokin', for I'll drill you the minute you hit the floor."

"Buck," I said quickly, "I didn't know who he was, except that he was making his get-away, and was hungry, and his horse was played out. The posse was after him, and I hid him up in the loft. Then you blew in from nowhere, and the confounded door dropped——"

"I worked the button round with my knife," said Sliver. "And I'm right sad that I missed you, Buck. It's kind of cramped up here—for right quick work. I didn't figure you'd draw."

"He's cheerful about it, isn't he?" I said.

"He'll be crow bait if he shows a feather," stated Buck.

"Yes. And that's what I get for stalling that posse, when they suggested searching the loft. You fellows are sure making yourselves right at home."

"Well, neighbor, seein' as I got to eat, some time, and seein' Buck, there's right where he can git me if I come down, and seein' as I got to make a ride this mornin', I'm willin' to act peaceful, if Buck is willin' to do likewise." This from the loft.

Buck frowned. Then he holstered his gun, prematurely, I thought. "All right, Yardlaw. I got some business that I've got to see to—or I'd stick around a week to get a shot at you. Come on down."

"Sure! And I got some business, likewise, that needs seein' to. I'm comin'."

And Sliver, or Yardlaw, rather, dropped to the floor. A thin red streak showed on his face, from chin to ear. He saw that I noticed it, and he grinned. "Buck came mighty near hittin' me," he said.

"Here—come out in the kitchen and wash off the blood."

"And you better put some collodion on that," said Buck. "It's cold, and you don't want to take any chances."

"That's right. But I reckon a little soap and water'll fix her. You sure made a quick draw, pardner."

Buck, who stood watching Yardlaw wash the slight wound, smiled broadly. "Say, did you try to get me that time, or were you just showing some of your fancy stuff—knocking that glass out of my hand?"

"Fancy nothin'. I threw down to git you plumb center. It was sure a pore shot."

"Oh, I don't know," said Buck, rather pensively, I thought.

This was all very well, but I wanted to know what had set these two Texans blazing away at each other, without the slightest regard for the domestic proprieties. So I asked them sternly.

They hummed and hawed, looked rather foolish, and finally admitted that there had been an assertion, by friends of both, that each was the quicker with a gun. That along the border this had been an occasion for much wagering, and that while neither had the slightest grudge against the other, personally, why, professionally they were enemies through the kind offices of their friends.

"Well, you fellows make me tired," I told them. "Now, it's four-thirty, and we all need sleep. I'm going to bed. And, for Heaven's sake, if you two can't leave well enough alone, just please go out back of the old corral where I can't hear you and blaze away. I'm going to turn in right now."

"Suits me," said Buck.

"What suits you? Don't try to kid your uncle."

"Why, bed. I'm dog tired."

"Well, I ought to be," asserted Yardlaw. "But I ain't got time. I reckon I'll fan it."

"You won't get far on that horse," I told him.

"What do they want you for, anyway?" queried Buck.

"Why, I bumped off a Cholo down to Juarez 'cause he made a mistake when he took me for a renegade and told me he would spit on the first American flag he come across. He didn't spit none. Then I lit out and, comin' up through Arizona, my hoss played out and I traded him for a good cayuse—only the owner wa'n't there when I made the trade. Then, over in New Mexico, I hired out punchin' and some of the boys was killin' beef for market on the side. I reckon they figured to make me the goat of that outfit, so I come away."

"How are things along the border?" queried Buck.

"Mighty interestin', at times. Then quiet, at times. But it ain't like when we was in the service."

"Yardlaw was a Ranger," said Buck.

"Not Jim Yardlaw?"

"That's this bird, right here." And Buck seemed rather proud of the statement. "How does your cheek feel?" he queried.

"Fine! Did any of that there glass cut you?"

"Not a sliver. But say, hombre, right now is the time to ride—just before daybreak."

"Reckon yo're right."

I glanced at Buck and he winked. I glanced at Yardlaw and he grinned. "All right," I said. "Go ahead and steal a horse—only don't take the pinto. And when you get where you can do it, turn him over to some one and send word to me. I'll turn your cayuse out on pasture. He wouldn't make a bad trade, if he were fed up."

"I get you, neighbor. And I'm gone."

"Not before you shake hands with Buck—and pack some grub in your saddle pockets. And don't you ever show up around this rancho again."

Two months later I received a note by messenger—an old desert prospector who came through about twice a year. The note was from Yardlaw, although he signed it "Sliver." It was brief:

> This man knows where your horse is when you want him. I ain't got no use for him as I am skinning mules for a spell. Keep my horse and welcome to him for what you done one night. If you are writing to Buck say to him that my lungs is good yet. SLIVER.

And that was the last I heard of him. I did not give his message to Buck, because Buck is rather sensitive. But I did have to mend a hole in the shingles where Buck's forty-five went through, and I did have to explain to one member of my family, returned from a journey to the East, the presence of a flattened bullet in the living room, overlooked by me, and the silvery spatter on the stone fireplace where Sliver's compliment to Buck had spent itself. "A piece of foolishness on my part," I told the lady who insisted on knowing all about it. She interpreted my guilty expression to suit herself. And I did not enlighten her.

Shag of the Packs

By Edison Marshall

Author of "The Last Grizzly," "The Mole," Etc.

Shag was a dog who had been raised among wolves. He became the best killer of the pack, and he turned his talents in a way that surprised his mates at the last

JUST who is the ultimate authority in the southern Oregon forests is a question that has never been settled. It is really an important matter. Most naturalists disagree with one another, and it is likely that the forest folk—the creatures of talon and paw and wing—disagree among themselves. It does very well to say in the abstract that the lion is the recognized king of beasts, but if his dominion has spread to the forests of the lake region it is yet to be discovered. There are several of the larger animals that would likely question his sovereignty.

For instance, there are the bears. It is hard to imagine old Woof being bossed around by any one. He has an independent spirit, and except from human beings that really don't count, a bear will not run from any living creature. But while he doesn't intend to be ruled, he is much too lazy and amiable and forgetful to try to rule any one else. No one in right senses could really call Woof the forest king.

Any naturalist who has seen a cougar stretched out luxuriously on the great, gnarled limb of a tree might be inclined to think that he has aspirations for the sovereignty. If grace and agility and cruelty could make a king, it would not be necessary to look any further than Brownbody. He has the same sharp talons and gleaming fangs of his cousin the lion, he has the terrible, sinuous, resistless strength of the felines, and he is one of the largest of the Oregon wild animals. But there is one rather serious difficulty. The cougar is graceful and stately as long as there is nothing more dangerous than a fawn or a porcupine in sight. A ten-pound terrier can usually tree him in a minute.

The elk is the largest creature in the Oregon mountains, and seemingly has every trait of the monarch. No one who has beheld his stately tread in the fighting days of fall can believe otherwise. No crown of gold was ever more wonderful than the many-tined antlers that sweep out from the beautiful head, and not even a cougar's talons are better weapons than those razor-edged front hoofs of the great elk bull. It is a powerful cougar who will care to attack an elk alone. The latter has a way of getting him beneath his hoofs and churning back and forth—about as deadly a proceeding as a cougar ever encounters. The elk have a far-ringing, triumphant call that is kingly in itself, and really they are the most noble of the whole deer tribe. Of course, they aren't as large as the European Elk, which is really a blood brother to America's moose; but they are true stags with none of the latter's awkwardness and general ungainliness.

Then there are the lesser aspirants, the poison people in particular. Every beast in the forest—even the elk—turns from his trail rather than tread on Loose-fang. And the buzzard that glides all day on his motionless wings has even a stronger claim than the rattlesnake. "All things come to me in the end," the buzzard boasts to his fledglings. He means he is the carrion eater of the forest, and thus he is the ultimate conqueror of all things.

But when all is said and done, there remain the wolves. There is an old legend in the forest that they were the first people, and it is certain that they will be the last to go. Wherever naturalists have gone, into the most trackless wildernesses or the most remote prairies, there have always been wolves. They were here in the beginning, and they will stay to the end. As long as the forest endures, the packs will flourish. No systematic hunting, not trap nor poison nor gun, can completely conquer them. They have the right proportion of cunning and cowardice and frenzied bravery to win

in the struggle for existence—and this is only one of the reasons why, after all, perhaps the wolves are the real heart and soul and rulers of the wilderness.

It is true that the wolf pack is the single, greatest hunting machine in the whole wild world. No individual creature, except a strong man with an unerring rifle, can hope to stand against it. Woe to the stately elk on whose track the wolf pack sings in winter! In the desperation of their hunger, even old Woof is not safe from them. No snow is deep enough, no cold sufficiently severe, or no land so terrible and bleak that the wolf pack can be entirely conquered. They go to the barren reaches of the poles, and when all the other forest creatures have migrated south or buried in the snow, they range the wintry mountains alone.

To know the wolves from fang to tail, goes an old saying, is to know the forest. They typify the wilderness above all other living things. They are its symbol and sign, eternal as the pines themselves; moody as the forests and deadly as the snows. The strength of the mountains is the strength of the pack—remorseless, unconquered, resistless. And the song that the wailing wolf pack sings in the winter nights is the very voice and articulation of the wilderness, note for note and sound for sound—sad beyond all measurement and wild past all power of words to tell.

It is not that the wolves have any commendable qualities. A lone wolf is a distressing coward. The whole breed is hated and feared wherever men have gone. The only war that is known, in Lapland, is the war against the wolves. But their vices only make them more typical of the wilderness. They are treacherous, but so is a mountain trail. They are stealthy, but whoever has heard the wind creeping through the pine tops at night, knows that it is stealthy, too. They are silent and full of cunning. And, above all things, they are imbued with that terrible remorselessness of the wilderness—a merciless savagery that, once met, never is forgotten.

There are plenty of reasons why, in folklore, the wolf has always been thought of as some gray demon of the snow, the very antithesis of all that is dear and true in life. Only in the far-remote past, in certain pagan tribes where cruelty was virtue, have the wolves ever been regarded with anything but hatred and terror. They are the one breed of all the higher creatures that will ruthlessly commit cannibalism on their mates. They are one of the few breeds that seems to have no pack rule against the killing of men. They lack the beauty of the deer, the mentality of the elephant, the faithfulness of the dog or horse. They have only their savage cunning, their relentless cruelty, and their old degenerate creed that has always been the direct opposite to the creed of civilization—that no mercy or justice or moral issue must stand between them and their survival. They have a strange, merciless hatred for their cousins, the dogs; and most naturalists have wondered why. Perhaps is it just the hatred that dark angels have always had for the bright—because the dogs have given their love and services to men.

And while this is the story of the wolf pack, it is also the story of Shag, the shepherd with the strain of a greater breed. It is the tale of the wolf pack's law, and a higher law that has fallen, from whence no man knows, to show the way in the upward climb of man and beast.

II.

Silas Lennox had a calendar hung on the white walls of his cabin; but he didn't need its word to know that the month was May. He was rather like the beasts, in this respect. He had lived long enough in the forest to know the sign and mark of every change in the seasons.

The wild creatures that lived in the mountains about his cabin never saw a calendar from their life's beginning to its end; but yet they never made any mistake about the seasons. The very faces of the mountains were calendars to them. In the summer these were rather tawny and parched, and the rivers dwindled and dried up, and there was a smell of seasonal flowers and drying marshes and sunbaked earth. The twigs got so dry and brittle that they sometimes even could hear Brownbody, the cougar, as he stole up the deer trails; and, as a rule, Brownbody makes about as much noise as the stars when they pop through the twilight sky. In the fall the mountains were golden and hazy and still, and if this wasn't sign enough, the sight of old Woof, the bear, gorging and sleeping alternately in the berry thickets, would indicate the season quite unmistakably.

The smells are always particularly mys-

terious in the fall. Some of them, such as those that call the wolves to the pack and the deer to the herd, are quite impossible for human beings to perceive. In the winter all smells are obliterated; but there are plenty of other signs of the season. There is the snow, endless and wan in the moonlight, bowing down the fir limbs until it seems impossible that they could ever come straight again; and the far-carrying cry of the wolf pack. No one could possibly mistake that cry for the yell that the pack utters when the wolves first congregate in the fall. The latter cry is rather triumphant, simply charged with the new sense of might that their numbers give them. But the song saddens as the winter advances. And at last the pack begins to sing about a certain grim and terrible spirit that walks over the ever-deepening snow, and which makes himself particularly well known to the wolves. He is Starvation, and once to hear the wild, sad song that is made to him is to remember it until death. When Lennox heard it, he always knew that winter had come in earnest. Naturalist and hunter and mountaineer, he had come to know the mountains almost as well as the forest creatures themselves.

Now it was May, and the signs were everywhere. The snow was melting on the lower levels, quaint little modest mountain flowers were blossoming in the young grass and blowing everywhere the faintest, most delightful perfume that could be imagined. The whole forest life was wakening: birds from the south and rodents from the ground and even old Woof out of his cavern in the snowdrifts. Likely he was puzzled by the aspect of nature. It had been all white and cold when he had gone to sleep. Now it was green and fragrant and inviting. But as life was just one long puzzle to Woof from beginning to end, as it is to all really philosophical people, he forgot it speedily and shuffled away to hunt grubs.

But of all the signs of spring, there was none more evident than a certain miracle that had occurred in Lennox's woodshed, not five days before. All over the mountain realm, this same miracle was occurring daily. Everywhere the females of the several species were leaving their herds or their packs, and stealing away into the thickets. The young of the forest folk are all born in spring, and the shepherd's litter had not been an exception. Four little, ratlike creatures lay huddled together on one of Lennox's old coats, and even now they were whimpering for their mother's return.

And, curiously, Lennox himself was waiting for the same thing. The shepherd did not usually stay out on the hills after nightfall. There were certain good reasons why, among them the particular prevalence of wolves. She had disappeared just before twilight, evidently on one of her rambling excursions through the mountains. Darkness had come down, fleet and mysterious as ever, and she had not yet returned.

Lennox stood at his cottage threshold, his quiet eyes intent on the forests that stretched in front. Only a faint glimmer lingered in the west. He could see the profile of distant pines against the sky line; and the light from his cabin door died quickly in the shadows. He was not quite alone. A woman worked about the cookstove, and a little girl, perhaps eleven years old, stood fumbling at his hands.

The silence of the mountains depends entirely on how intently one listens. Sometimes, to the casual ear, they seem absolutely silent. And this is a silence not soon to be forgotten, in which no leaf stirs or wind whispers; and at such times it is some way vaguely distressing to hear the pronounced stir and beat of one's own pulse. But, listening keenly, sometimes other sounds can be heard, usually at long intervals and so faint that one can never be quite sure of their reality. They do not in the least destroy the effect of absolute silence. They seem rather to accentuate it—the faint snap of a footstep on a dry twig, the rustle of a wing, or the stir of a rodent. Lennox's ears were keen, and it seemed to him that the darkness was vibrant and poignant with such little, hushed sounds.

They didn't mar the fine edge of his nerve. He was used to them. But at the same time he was rapidly growing apprehensive as to the fate of his shepherd dog.

A few minutes before he had heard the timber wolves at their hunting. Their numbers were evidently few—merely the remainder of the pack that had not yet broken up, consisting of a few young males and barren females. As usual, he had been able to distinguish four or five separate tones, indicating at least that many animals. They had found some kind of game on the ridge; and Lennox was perfectly aware that he had likely seen his pet for the last time. The cries he had heard had been the pierc-

ing barks of a fighting pack, and that fact meant either they had encounterd a cougar or a bear, or else had attacked his shepherd. Deer, the usual game of wolves, do not necessitate a fight. Bear and cougar are rarely attacked except when the pack is starving. A dog, however, is always fair game to the wolf pack.

He had always depended on the dog's speed to protect her from the wolves. It was true that they could wear her out in a long chase, but under most conditions, she would have been able to reach the cottage in safety. He wondered if she had been taken by surprise or surrounded.

"The puppies are whimpering," his daughter told him. "They're hungry for their supper."

He looked down at her with a singularly sweet smile. It would have surprised an onlooker. The stern face of the mountaineer had not seemed capable of such lightning change in expression.

"And only Shep can give it to them, too," her father answered. He knew perfectly that by no conceivable circumstances, if the shepherd were killed, could he hope to save the litter. He lived as much alone as the Innuits in the arctic, and there was no milk for the whimpering pups.

But at that instant, the child clapped its hands. She saw the form of a dog stealing toward them out of the shadows. Then both of them stiffened. Shep had come home, but both of them knew at the same instant that she had only come home to die.

It is a curious instinct that causes all living creatures to seek shelter in their final hour. Soldiers had observed this phenomena too many times for a possibility of a mistake. Perhaps it is an instinct having its source in the young days of the race—a last effort to protect the lifeless body from the wild things of the field. It is the same impulse that causes a wounded soldier to creep under the scantiest bush for his last breath. At first, in the dim light, Shep seemed to be stealing along with belly close to the ground, after the manner of a stalking animal. But when she came close, the girl hid her face.

Shep had met the pack on the ridge; and, although her swift legs had enabled her to escape from them, she had been mortally wounded. A savage bite had torn at one of the great veins in the shoulder. "Shep! Old Shep!" the mountaineer whispered as he bent over the shuddering form. The emotions of the mountain men are primitive and deep. Lennox had loved his dog as he had his own family. And her loss meant the death of the whelps, too. And it is not good to live in the mountains without a dog.

For a little while he stood staring into the darkness, his dark features intent. But in a moment, he laughed at his own folly. If any of the mountain men of his neighborhood had killed his dog there would have been debts to pay. But no vengeance could be taken from the creatures of the wild. In the first place, the range was inhabited by a thousand wolves, any one of which might have been the slayer. At once he turned his thought to the problem of saving the whelps.

He walked about to his woodshed, and held a candle over them. There were four of them, all whimpering. He examined each in turn. One was a particularly splendid specimen—almost half again as large as any of the others, and a male. Evidently it had partaken of many of the qualities of the great hound that was its father.

All at once he laughed in the darkness. It was not that he had so soon forgotten the death of his pet. It was just then an idea, so bizarre and strange that he could hardly give it credence, had flashed into his mind. He saw a way in which he might save the life of this largest of the whelps. But it was such an ironic thing; and the grim sense of humor that the mountains imbue brought the short syllable of laughter to his lips.

While sharing the universal hatred of the wolves, Silas Lennox had an intense interest in all the wild life about him. He was really quite an accomplished naturalist; and now the plan that had occurred to him would have done credit to a scientist. As an experiment, it promised all manner of interesting developments. For a long moment his daughter's questions went unanswered.

On his return from a tramp across the ridges late that afternoon, he had flushed a she-wolf from a great clifflike pile of rocks on the mountainside. It was an old resort for wolves, and he had been confident at once that the female had a litter of wolf cubs in one of its caverns. He had vaguely intended to return within a few days and kill the cubs for the bounty. But the prize money would only amount to a few dollars, and the satisfaction that he would get from his experiment would more than make up for them.

So he took the largest of the cubs and carried it into the house with him. The mountain night is never to be trifled with. The warmth of the slut's body had preserved the lives of the whelps on previous nights, but he wished to run no risks with little Shag. Just why he named him Shag was something of a mystery. It was certain that the hair that covered the little body was not yet long enough to justify the name. All night long the cub whimpered its hunger, wrapped in a great coat behind the kitchen stove.

"Don't worry, old chap," the mountaineer called to him as he went to his own bed. "To-morrow night you'll have somebody warm to sleep with."

It was a curious thing—the little drama that transpired just before dawn. Lennox rose and dropped the pup into the pocket of his coat. Then he climbed up slowly to the pile of rocks that he had passed on the preceding afternoon.

But he didn't seek at once for the cavern. The reason was extremely simple. Wolves are cowardly as a rule; but Lennox knew enough of animals to know that no trust must be placed in a she-wolf with cubs. Sometimes they display a sudden. desperate courage that isn't pleasant to face. He climbed up to a vantage point about one hundred yards from the rock pile. It was noticeable that he kept to the windward of the rocks, and that he walked with extreme caution.

He knew the way of the wolves. He thought he wouldn't have long to wait. A half hour passed, and the dawn brightened. Then he saw the she-wolf come stalking forth from her lair.

Lennox sat perfectly still. A single twitch of a muscle might have given him away. The she-wolf sniffed, looked about intently, then turned down the cañon. Still the man sat motionless. As he had anticipated, in a moment the wolf came circling back. Assured this time that no danger threatened her whelps, she trotted boldly down the glen and disappeared in the brush at its end.

A moment more the mountaineer waited, to make certain that the wolf would not reappear. Then he crept down to the rock pile. It was but the work of a moment to find the cavern. Its entrance was narrow, and he had to lie almost flat to creep in. And it was to be noted that he carried his pistol ready in his hand. Lennox was mountaineer enough to know that occasionally the male wolf will remain on guard over the whelps; and he wished to be prepared for emergencies. A wolf cornered in a cavern is not pleasant to encounter.

He scratched a match; then chuckled aloud. It was just as he had thought. Five wolf cubs, not yet a week old, lay in a little furry heap in the corner of the cavern. They whined at the hand that stretched to them.

Lennox spent no more time in the lair than was absolutely necessary. He chose the nearest of the whelps and dropped it into his pocket. From the opposite pocket he took the whimpering form of Shag. And he dropped him into the wolf cub's place.

An instant later he was crawling back into the light, the joy of a scientist shining in his eyes. The life of Shag, growing up among the wolves, would be an absorbing study for years to come.

III.

The animal intelligence has certain very definite limits. This fact is indisputable. It is doubtful that the she-wolf was ever aware of the alien presence among her litter. It was not that she could not see in the gloomy cavern. The bright circles of blue fire that she wore for eyes were particularly well fitted for seeing in the darkness. It was just that her understanding could not leap far enough to conceive of the substitution.

It was true that she knew of the human visitor. She had something even better than understanding—a nose as sharp and sure as the scientific instruments of a detective. At first she was greatly disturbed. She stole about the rock pile, looking for enemies; then examined her cubs to see that no harm had befallen. Little Shag was lifted tenderly between her strong jaws, shaken for sign of an injury, and deposited with the rest. She was not in the least suspicious of him. If she had any emotion at all regarding him, it was motherly pride—for he was half again as large as the other cubs. When she laid down among them, he had strength enough to push away one of his foster brothers to get at his dinner.

He thrived on the strong milk. There came a day when his eyes were completely opened, and he had the first look at his foster brothers. They were still blind, and he nosed them with impunity. And he began

to wonder about the piercing light that flung in through the cavern maw. It hurt his eyes at first; but at the same time he had an irresistible instinct to crawl toward it. The she-wolf, returning from a hunt, met him at the very mouth of the cavern.

She knocked him back among his brothers; but she was proud of him none the less. That he would already start out on an expedition of his own, on the day that sight had come to his eyes, gave promise of two traits that should carry him far. These two traits are very essential in the forest. One leads to power, even to sovereignty of the pack. It is courage. The other, no less important, brings knowledge. Old Woof has such a large bump of it he can scarcely carry it around. It is curiosity. It is interesting to conjecture where human beings would be to-day if the lesser people from which we sprung had not been simply eaten up with curiosity about everything under the sun. It has been the impulse that led to greatness.

But the day was soon to come when the mother wolf was to take her brood out on the hillside with her. The spring was drawing to early summer. And possibly, by now, the she-wolf had begun to have vague wonderings about this largest of her children. He didn't hold his ears quite like his brothers. Their ears were always pointed, intent on distant sounds. Shag let his droop back in a curious way, and now and again he carried his tail lifted rather than pointed down. He had a reddish tinge and softer fur. But she couldn't question his superiority. He was the strongest of her litter, the best able to take care of himself in the awkward, half-cocked, snarling tussles that they waged among themselves; and he was always quickest to learn. And the strangest thing of all was the way he wagged his tail, back and forth, when he was pleased. It was a motion unknown among the others.

Then the hills began to grow yellow and still in the long, hot days of late summer. The wolf and her brood ranged ever farther. They were learning to hunt.

In all the range of human experience, there is no more keen excitement than the first hunt of a wolf. They would start out at the first fall of darkness, and little Shag went wild with rapture at the first breath of the night. There were the smells, pungent and wild in the wind, the sounds of the whispering, stirring forest life, the long shadows, the deep thickets, the mystery and the silence. Shag was a dog, but all dogs are first cousins to the wolves. The hunting came natural to him.

At first the brood kept to the rear of their mother, and had no hand in the actual killing. But once, she let them gather about a stricken fawn from which the life had not yet fled. She taught them to stalk—that utter silent advance that is the accomplishment of most of the wild creatures, high and low—the quick lunge and recoil that in a death fight can tear an artery to shreds and fling the wolf back to safety; and one day she fished for them beside a little river that came tumbling into one of the Klamath Lakes. Fishing was an art in itself. It required the most exacting patience. A human being, fishing for trout, is usually ready to leave a hole if it does not yield up a strike in a dozen casts. The old she-wolf thought nothing of standing beside a creek for a full hour, as motionless as a form in stone, waiting for the suspicious trout to come to the surface. Then her paw would whip down like the head of a serpent; and that means that no human eye could follow it. She would strike the fish from the water as a tennis player strikes the ball from the air.

And of those things that she did not teach, little Shag had a whole fund of instincts to tell him. Instincts taught him how to freeze into simply a motionless dark shadow, almost invisible in the thickets, at the first sign of danger. He knew how to drift like smoke through the underbrush, how to creep up on a covey of grouse, how to put the whole weight of his body behind the blow.

Usually he hunted with his little foster brothers. Already he was their leader. The thousands of generations that his ancestors had lived with human beings had instilled in him a natural sagacity far beyond that of the general run of wolf cubs. And his training was giving him, in addition, that superlative cunning of the wild creatures.

One night he wakened with a realization that a change had come in the seasons. The hours of hunting had lengthneed, and now it seemed to him that the daylight, to be spent in sleeping in the cavern, sped like a breath. Berries were ripe in the thickets, and old Woof, the bear, shuffled and grunted among them from twilight till dawn. Shag was not interested in berries himself. He was a meat eater; and he felt some degree of scorn

for the piglike creature that munched them with such delight. The leaves of the perennial trees were splotched with reds and yellows, and always they were whisking off in the winds. More than once their rustle had frightened him in the night. But these things were not the greatest change. The thing that moved him most was a new stir, a new impulse in the air. The air was crisp and cold, and it made his blood leap in his veins. And one night the snow fell on the high ridges, lay a little while a mysterious mantel over the leaves, and then melted away.

And in the last days of fall, little Shag was introduced to the wolf pack.

He heard them coming a long way. They were singing along the ridges, a wild, strange song that moved him more than any hunting. The sound carried far, rising and falling over the shadowed forest, and its echo was a voice that suddenly spoke out of Shag's savage heart. He found himself trembling all over. And, yes, his mother was trembling, too, as if in terror. The other whelps stood behind her.

He had never heard the pack before—for the simple reason that the wolves live apart all through the summer months. How he recognized the sound at once is a mystery that most human beings would not care to attempt to explain. Of course, he had heard his mother's voice, raised in triumph over her kill. Yet the sound was nothing like this wild, strange chant that came soaring down from the ridges.

His mother answered the call—a swift, joyous bark—and began to hasten up the ridge toward the pack. And Shag and her cubs ran behind her.

They met on a new burn on the very top of the ridge. Even the underbrush had been burned away, and the gaunt forms of the wolves were clear and sharp in the moonlight. It was a strange place. The black snags cast eerie shadows, and the wind made a queer rustle as it swayed them, back and forth. The she-wolf barked again, and some of the pack answered her.

She turned her head, whining to her cubs. They understood. She was calling them to follow her. As naturalists know, the wolf cubs are usually introduced to the pack in the fall. Once inducted, they are speedily forgotten. They follow the old gray leader on the hunt until the spring comes, and then, still too young to breed, they usually hunt with cubs of their own age until another fall. And the old gray leader of the pack —a wolf that weighed over ninety pounds—came sniffing forward to greet her.

And then there ensued a curious interlude. Usually the introduction of the cubs to the pack is a very short and uninteresting ceremony. A few of the mothers look them over with an appraising eye, a few of the cubs come forward to nudge and romp with them, and the saucy yearlings pretend to ignore them completely. And the she-wolf herself had never dreamed but that her litter would be admitted without question. But she hadn't counted on Shag.

The entire pack seemed to see him at the same instant. Their bodies whirled in the leaves, a singular sideways jerk of the forequarters as if by the recoil of a powerful spring that brought them facing him in a fighting position—a motion as instinctive as their own breathing. A dozen of them stood crouching, tense and silent among the ruined trees.

It was only for an instant. It had been a simple reflex at the sight of an ancient enemy. It is a curious thing that no more intense hatred exists in the animal world than between the wolves and the dogs. The pack recognized Shag at once as one of their hated cousins. The older wolves, seeing him among the she-wolves' litter, were willing to wait and question. But this is not the way of young blood.

Among the pack was a certain young and very arrogant yearling, and he had been hoping all the night for an opportunity to display his prowess. His body simply seemed to streak in the air. A motion faster than a wolf's leap can scarcely be imagined; and the she-wolf did not even have time to throw herself on the defensive. She snapped at the dark form as it sped past her, then whirled to her foster son's defense.

But the most curious thing of all was that her aid was not needed. Shag had reflexes, too, as finely edged as those of the wolves, and without conscious thought he gathered to meet the spring. But, he didn't permit it to strike him squarely. That would have meant an instant's disadvantage before he could recover from the force of the impact. He sprang aside, and the yearling's body only brushed his shoulder. And as it went past his white fangs flashed out and buried in the soft flesh of the yearling's throat.

There was no second leap to that fight.

It was a clean kill, a single, unerring bite to the jugular vein. Although Shag was half again as large as any of the other seasonal cubs, the yearling had outweighed him by ten pounds. And the old gray veterans of the pack wondered among themselves.

For an instant all individual voices were drowned out in the snarl that went up from the pack. Perhaps it was the smell of blood, perhaps only the excitement that sweeps like a fire through their veins at the sight of a death fight. Shag stood facing the pack, shivering with fear, yet crouched and ready for the next aggressor. The old wolves stood silent in the moonlight. And the she-wolf was crouched in front, ready to fight till she died for her foster cub.

A gray wolf stalked forward, and she snarled menacingly. But he made it plain he meant no harm to her cubs. He sniffed at her, and she returned the caress. Then he lifted his nose to the moon and howled.

She howled, too. The pack raised its voice. Shag had never heard such a sound as this before. It thrilled and moved him beyond any experience of his life. It was the very voice of the wilderness, sad and wild and strange beyond all simile.

Then the pack swung on up the ridge, and Shag ran with the other cubs. But the evening had taught one lesson. His whole life with the wolves was to be continual strife, with death, soon or late, at the end.

IV.

Although he did not know it, Lennox's experiment had turned out well. Shag was a dog with a wolf's training—a wild animal with the instincts of domesticity. He had learned the ways of the wild. Above them, serene and sure as a strong man's courage, he had the penetrating, calculating intelligence of a dog.

No animal ever had a more terrific struggle for existence. He shared all the dangers of the wolf pack, and was at perpetual war with the wolves themselves besides. Trap and poison and rifle were always out for him. He had certain handicaps—various senses that generations in domesticity had blunted, and structural differences that lessened his endurance. He fought for the right to run with the pack—a fresh battle every fall—and he killed until the wolves whined and told him to kill no more. It was true that he could have hunted alone. But such a course never occurred to him. He had grown up with the wolves, and the wolves' ways were the only ways he knew. In the fall he fought for his mate, fight after fight, until he conquered.

The result of all these battles was, of course, an abnormal physical development, and fighting prowess far beyond any of his gaunt fellows of the pack. He was rather larger than most of the wolves. Trained down, without a fraction of an ounce of extra flesh on his gaunt frame, he weighed a full one hundred pounds. He had the general build of his shepherd mother; while the larger breed of his father gave him additional strength and size. He had a beautiful bronze coat, his mother's intelligent head and eyes, a splendid brush, and a full-ringing bay that could announce his kill across miles of silent cañon. Above all things, he was a fighter. He fought after the wolf fashion—lightning spring and recoil—but he put into his battles a cold intelligence and cunning that would overbalance any kind of a physical handicap.

He lived the life of the gray, far-ranging hunters of the ridges; and mostly he found it good. He delighted in the changing seasons, the thrill and stir of spring, the long hunting twilights of summer, and the fighting days of fall. The delight when the pack first ran together was always new. He loved the sense of resistless strength, of grim companionship, and his wild heart would leap and threaten to burst at the wolves' song that rose and fell as they ran along the ridges. He loved the constant battle, the realization that his own prowess alone had forced himself upon the pack.

But it was not all joy. There was always fear, the heritage of every beast of the wild, and he got to know it very well. He knew cold, too—cold that dropped down seemingly from the farthest stars, cold to lock the eyelashes and strike dead the mountain streams.

The wolf cry was always so eerie and strange over the snow. It seemed to carry so far. And in those winter days he became particularly well known to hunger. These were the starving times, and no living creature that passed the track of the pack was safe. All forest laws turn to dust in the face of hunger. Nothing matters then. At such times, Shag kept close watch on even the female that ran beside him. He didn't know when her sharp fangs would leap for his throat.

Except for one thing, Shag would have been content. Of course, that means something far different from the contentment of human beings. The whole tone and key of the wilderness is sad; and the longer a naturalist lives in it, the more unavoidable becomes this fact. There is fear and cold and hunger, and the constant, tireless, unceasing struggle for existence. Of course, there are compensations; and, perhaps, one night of such exultation as the wolf pack knows when it swings along on the elk trail makes up for a whole season of cold and hunger. The single exception, in the case of Shag, was a strange, little-understood feeling of unfamiliarity and unrest with all this forest life.

There was one sensation that was always returning to him. It seemed to him, as he hunted through the thickets, that some dearly beloved companion that he had always known had just been lost to him. The companion was never another wolf—rather it was a tall figure, straight and utterly fearless. There was an actual sense of loss, of loneliness; and often he would spend long hours beating through the brush in search of this lost friend. In his dreams, those hunts with the tall, straight form were particularly frequent. He didn't know who it was. He only knew it was some one very brave and very strong, whose will must never be opposed.

To his knowledge, he had never even caught sight of human beings. Once or twice he was dimly aware that some unknown breed of creature lived down on the level spaces along the rivers, but the few times that he came near enough to be aware of them, the pack would desert him and flee. They always seemed so afraid—even in their full strength. It was a curious thing. He liked to feel, particularly in the autumn time before the winter subdued and humbled him, that the pack need fear no living thing that walked the earth. Even the great elk fled from the assembled wolves, so why should they be afraid of these unknown creatures in the valleys? And it seemed to be the worst fear of all. Even that of the forest fire was secondary. He had known the pack to keep its formation when the forest fire roared behind. But always at the first tart smell on the wind, an icy terror seemed to get into all their number. They would scurry in all directions, and leave him wondering on the hills alone.

He began to have a devouring curiosity in regard to them. The smell that reached him was not greatly different from the smell of a forest fire; so he began to think that possibly the valley was inhabited by some particularly terrible kind of forest fires. And this wasn't to be wondered at, for, of course, that particular smell was nothing more than the smoke from chimneys. More than once he determined to climb down in the valleys and see for himself. But he never had quite the courage to do it. Of course, it was a simple matter of fear contagion, imbued from his fellows of the pack.

But even the smell of the wood smoke found curious echoes in his memory. It seemed to him he had known it always; and at such times it seemed to him that it must not be so terrible, after all.

At last there came the summer when he saw one of these inhabitants of the valley. And he knew at once that he had found his lost companion—the tall form that had evaded him in the thickets.

It was a midsummer afternoon, and he and his mate were asleep in the buck brush. There is an old saying that a wolf sleeps with one eye open. Of course, it isn't literally true; but it means that no matter how deeply he is asleep, he is always ready to jump. He has a whole range of reflexes that are a great deal better than automatic burglar alarms. Shag and his mate, at the same fraction of the same instant, wakened with the realization that some living creature had approached their lair. A deer would have leaped to his feet in panic, perhaps to be overtaken by a hunter's bullet. And maybe that is the reason that the deer are becoming extinct in regions where wolves still flourish. But Shag and his mate were not deer; so, except for the faintest stir when they awakened, they crouched and were still.

Both of them saw the same instant. Usually the she-wolf waited for her mate to decide the course of action. This time she decided herself. She began to steal away in the opposite direction—creeping at first, then trotting, and as the wall of brush grew thick behind her, running at top speed.

It was a curious thing. Of course, he was frightened himself, at first. There is no disease in all the world so contagious as fear; and some of the terror that his mate felt was instilled in him. But at once a more tremendous emotion got the better of it. He

was suddenly, deeply curious about this tall figure in the thickets.

For the first time in his life he was looking at a human being. It was the tall and pretty daughter of Silas Lennox, sixteen now, and quite as straight as the pines she lived among. She was climbing the ridge on an errand of her father's.

He stood trembling, as if in abject terror. And he didn't understand that sudden fever that came into his blood. He felt strangely and deeply humbled, even more than when the winter sun shone on the expanse of snow.

But the girl did not look at him. She was singing to herself, and her feet tripped lightly over the carpet of pine needles. In an instant the brush crept round her.

Shag had forgotten his mate. He only knew that he must keep this straight form in sight. He must not lose her again. All his days he had sought her—and already the brush had come between. Forgetting his mate, forgetting his danger and all the training of his wild days, he began to creep after her. He went softly as smoke, shadowing her with all his cunning. He was careful to keep out of sight himself. He followed her by sound, and by the occasional glint of her dress through the thickets.

Never let it be dreamed that he was hunting her. It was not blood lust that propelled him upon this pursuit. It was an emotion he had never known before, that seemingly would burn him to dust before he reached the end of the trail.

The girl did not hear him at all. She sang her way to her destination. It was a cabin across the ridge from her father's cottage, and a woman kissed her at the door. It was the first of these kind of lairs that Shag had ever seen, and he made a slow circuit about it before he came to any conclusion in regard to it. Then he decided that his earlier opinions, that it was in some manner connected with forest fires, must have been right. There was smoke pouring from the chimney. But his emotion was only awe, not fear. And he settled down in the thickets to wait for the girl to reappear.

He waited the whole night. She did not come. His mate whimpered in the brush behind; but at first he did not heed her. A voice was calling to him down the years, clear and distinct through ten thousand generations of dogs, that could not be denied. It was an obligation, more compelling than the call of the wilderness behind him. His mate came close to him, and tried to tug at his shoulders. But not until the dawn broke did he waken from his wondering, longing dreams enough to turn to her.

"Come with me, Shag," she seemed to be saying. "They are not our people. Come with me—the hour of hunting is here."

"They are not your people, true," Shag might have answered her, as her eyes lowered before his. "But they are mine. I have found them at last."

The dawn broke over the hills. It was the hunting hour. And already the glimpse of the girl in the thickets had begun to partake of the quality of a dream—such a dream as he had had so many times before of trailing some straight figure through the forests. Perhaps it was not real after all —and the deer were feeding on the ridges. So he turned and followed his mate.

V.

In the ensuing fall, Shag never forgot the glimpse of the figure in the thickets. Even in mating time he remembered her; and what is recalled in this wild season must, indeed, he deeply inscribed on the memory. Often he would find himself oppressed with strange longings and desires for which there was no relief, and often he made long, restless journeys through the thickets the purpose of which he hardly understood himself. He always seemed to be looking for some one—some one whose dress would flash through the buck brush, and whose feet would trip over the pine needles. During such hunts, he would often let the deer cross his trail without even glancing at them.

It was a busy fall for the forest folk. An instinct had whispered to them, and preparations for the coming winter seemed more than usually extensive. The gnawing people were particularly busy. They enlarged their burrows, and worked ceaselessly to pack them full of food. The industry of the bees was a thing to wonder at. Usually they keep close to their trees on cloudy days, and stop work as if by a union order rather early in the afternoon. But now they worked as if in the frenzy of starvation—even into the twilight and the cloudy days of late fall. It all portended something. And at first Shag, who was so high on the scale of animals that he had lost many of the instincts that are the guide to the lower peoples, did not know what.

Then he noticed that the berry crop was unusually large. Old Woof was delighted—Shag could hear his contented grunts every time he passed the huckleberry thickets. It was another sign pointing to the same conclusion. The flight of the waterfowl was exceptionally early; they had come and gone by the end of October. In the first of November the snows came to stay.

The forest creatures did not worry. They are not made of the stuff that worries. They had made what provision they could, and if this didn't avail they could simply die. There were none from whom they might ask help. The snow fell unceasingly, week after week. The deer moved down to the lower levels. Many of the other wild creatures, such as lynx and cougars, followed them; and no doe dared whisper to her fawn the reason why. The gnawing people and the bears—who really are just sort of overgrown rodents when one pauses to reflect—blinked lazily and yawned and went into their winter quarters. That meant they found a snug place under the snow and went to sleep. But Shag and the pack had no winter quarters to go to. They trusted to their furry hides to protect them against the cold; and sometimes they trusted in vain. And for certain reasons the pack did not dare go down to the foothills. The settlers that lived along the rivers were in no mood to stand any nonsense from wolves. Too many times they had heard their sheep bleat in the night. They waged a relentless war against them, and the wolves had learned to stay out of their way. The time was to come when hunger would remove this fear of the valleys; but it wouldn't remove their deep-seated instinct to remain on the high plateaus.

Southern Oregon is really a very temperate clime. The warm winds from the sea keep the valley green as a garden throughout the winter. But they die away on the snowfields before ever they reach the high plateaus. Then the snow deepens, week on week, until the tree boughs bend with it and every road and trail is covered.

The snow ceased in December, and clear, penetrating cold came instead. It froze the ice on the lakes. It drove away the last of the hardier creatures of the plateaus. The pheasants and the grouse headed down into the oak-scrub hillsides. And then a certain familiar spirit began to walk about the snows. The familiarity that he had with people has become more distant in late years, but yet the race has very good memory of him. And the wolf pack knew him particularly well. The spirit's name was Famine. Evidently he had come with the waterfowl out of the North. And he was many months before his time.

By the Christmas season, the pack's hunting was no longer worth the effort. There was simply nothing for them to kill. Once in a long while they found where a grouse was buried in the snow—but a grouse was only a bite for the fortunate wolf that seized it first. And one night the pack fought over the dead body of a porcupine, found frozen rigid in the snow. And there is an old saying in the forest that when a pack will fight for the body of a porcupine, the buzzard will feed in the dawn!

The wolves have endless endurance. It is one of the marvels of the animal world. They lost flesh, their ribs protruded, but still they kept their strength. They still covered the same astounding distances in their hunting. But there was a change in them. A very important part of them was lost with the last of their extra flesh. This part was their timidity, their cowardice—a trait that has always been the salvation of the wolf pack. Sad and strange was the song that they sang to the winter stars. And the fear of all things, except death in the shadow of famine, was entirely and suddenly gone from them.

January drew to its bitter close. The mountain world was lovely in its snow—a sort of terrible loveliness even in its awesomeness and savagery. The wolves crept silently in single file along the ridge tops. They were gaunt and terrible, and their eyes were swimming in curious blue fire. Shag, the hunger madness upon him, led the pack.

The sun came up on a February morning. It cast a luster on the world of snow. A girl's bright eyes saw it through the window, and it called a promise of a delightful morning for skis. Wrapped in her Mackinaw and leggings, she was not afraid of the cold. She did not even dream that such a spirit as Famine was abroad in the snow, particularly this early in the winter. True, her father, Silas Lennox, had complained of the absence of deer, but he had brought up meat from the valleys below.

She dressed quickly, and her father called gayly to her as he built the morning fires. He loved the look of her—this gaunt, silent

man. Tall and straight as a reed, yet she had begun to have the first curves and grace of a woman. Sixteen—and soon she must be sent to the advanced schools in the valley below. She answered his call, and put on her skis.

"Where this morning, Snowbird?" he demanded. "Not across the ridge to-day?"

"I must see Nell—'portant business!" she assured him solemnly. Nell was a girl friend that lived across the ridge.

"And you're quite certain it isn't Nell's good-looking brother!" The color deepened in her cheeks. This was a young mystery in itself. One wouldn't have thought it possible, touched by the sunrise as she was, and yet it was the truth.

She fled, light as a creature with wings, out across the snowdrifts in front of the house. Then she gave him a laughing answer. "I don't know it's entirely safe," he commented as he turned to his wife. "But what can you do, with a snow spirit like she is. She won't even take a gun——"

"But who would harm her, in these mountains!" the woman replied. She understood perfectly the instinct that so many times had led her daughter across the mountains to the distant cabin. "The wild animals are all cowards, and she's the fastest human being on earth on skis."

"All the same, I wish she had a dog. I wish old Shep was alive; or that little pup I left among the wolves!" His thought turned back to the spring day, almost six years before. He wondered if Shag had survived. Once he thought he had caught a glimpse of him in a distant thicket, but he had never been sure. It seemed to him that the experiment had not been justified, after all, as far as he himself was concerned. There had been little opportunity to study the wolf dog, after the first spring. He turned to his morning tasks.

The girl continued up the ridge. She gave no thought to anything but the tingling beauty of the morning. It was not a particularly wise thing to do. One of the mountain laws is to keep watch, every minute of every hour, and watch the trail. The girl thought she knew the lay of the land well enough to find her way straight across the ridges. In reality, she went a long distance out of her way.

Of course, she could not see the trail, covered as it was by snow. She relied on her infallible sense of direction. And even when she found she had gone three full miles from the path, she was not in the least alarmed. She knew the way, her young limbs were tireless, the morning was clear and bright and lovely, and she headed straight on toward her destination. She walked one more mile, and that meant she was practically halfway between the two homes.

She came out on a bare hillside, literally miles in extent. A forest fire had swept over it, like a black plague; leaving only at rare intervals an occasional tottering charcoal stump, a few feet in height. Of course, the buck brush had grown up in the half dozen years since the fire, but the snow, eight feet deep on the level, had completely covered it. It was a place that Shag might have remembered clearly as the scene of his first fight.

She continued on, for the moment relieved to come out of the great, silent timber. The wide plane, unbroken except for the drear burned palings in the snow, stretched for a sheer ten miles. She was at the top of the ridge by now; and the rest of the way was an easy, downward slope. It was not quite steep enough for coasting; but with a little effort of her own she increased her pace to that of a swift run. It was skiing at its best.

The grade grew less steep, and she slackened her pace. For an instant she stood still on the mountainside, for the first time aware of the peculiar depth of the silence through which she moved. The mountains are never anything but hushed except in the moments of forest fire or storm; but to-day they seemed to be simply buried in the most utter, breathless silence. It was a dead world, this mountain land. The snow lay deep and deep, as far as her tiring eyes could see. And this particular burn had a desolate quality that suddenly appalled her. Famine could walk here. It was just the kind of a place that the dread spirit would choose for its abode.

She stood still, straining at the silence. She could hear the stir of her own pulse. And then she hastened on. It was still miles to the cabin; but yet surely those miles would pass quickly. Nell's tall brother would walk home with her, once she reached her destination, and the two of them could laugh and stop to kiss in the very middle of this waste! She tried to hasten her step.

And at that instant, loud and terrible and

far-ringing through the silences, the wolf pack bayed upon her trail.

VI.

The high ridge where Snowbird stood would have made a picture that would be exceptionally hard to forget. The desolate snags, the miles of sunlit snow, the girl frozen in her tracks, all seemed to partake, in some vague way, of the quality of a dream. She seemed so slight, so girlish, seemingly so fragile in the face of this sudden expression of wilderness might.

Yet in reality she was very brave. It is not easy to keep self-control when the wolf pack bays. It is one of the most terrible sounds in the animal world, and in the lower creatures it usually induces a panic that leads straight to death. Of all the deadly things in the mountains, to loose self-control is the worst. It means the loss of sense of direction, of cunning and intelligence, and thus all hope of escape. Just for an instant she stood still, until the wild cry died away. And then the hardihood of spirit that life in the mountains induces came to her aid.

Her gaze leaped behind, then made a slow circle about her. And she was face to face with the truth. There were no trees that she could climb to safety. The nearest was far beyond the desolate stretch of burn, seemingly miles distant. The few burned, tottering poles that the fire had left could not be climbed, and if they could they would not bear her weight. One thing remained. It was flight.

And even flight was such a tragically long chance. She did not permit herself to hope that she could reach the big timber before the pack caught up with her. She could glide swiftly on her skis, but they could come more swiftly still. Her one hope was that she could intimidate them, hold them off, until she could reach safety. Life had got down simply to a matter of whether or not the wolves were desperate enough to attack at once.

The silence pressed about her, and she leaned forward to take the first stride. And for the first time it occurred to her that possibly all her fears had been in vain—that the wolf pack had simply crossed her trail on hunting of their own. Once more she glanced back to the top of the ridge.

But it was only an instant's hope. For in the swift glance that she had of the shoulder of the ridge, the truth came home very straight indeed. The pack had surmounted the crest. She saw the strange, gaunt forms, seeming abnormally large through the clear, thin atmosphere, in sudden, startling profile against the snow.

She did not cry out. If she made any sound at all, it was just a gásp, a soblike catching of the breath, that the utter, boundless silence swallowed and obscured. She knew what mercy she might expect from the wolf pack, if they attacked in the snow. The color was struck from her face. There was no interlude of time. It vanished with the speed of light. And then she started running down the long slope, faster than she had ever skied in her life before.

The pack was running by scent. Its gray members swung along in single file, heads low to the ground. A great, gaunt wolf ran in front, not because he was a physical superior to Shag, but because his nose was keener. Shag came next, his burnished coat lustrous in the sunlight. And the gaunt fellows followed, wholly silent and intent.

There was a quality of strangeness about this chase. The wolves were not usually so silent. The reason was simply that all of them were hovering on the very frontier of madness. They had gone hungry too long. It showed in the blue fire that always played in their eyes, in the way they sometimes whispered and growled deep in their throats, in the foam that often gathered about their terrible fangs. With Shag, it had taken the form of dreams. Night after night he had dreamed of the tall form he had lost and found and lost again, and it had become increasingly difficult to distinguish the dreams from the realities. He had heard, again and again, voices calling to him from the darkness and the thickets—voices that were full and strong and commanding. And his hunger was a searing fire within him.

At that instant the gray wolf in front bayed again—a short, hoarse cry that all of them understood. He had caught sight of their prey. True, it was too distant for their short-sighted eyes to distinguish, but any living creature was game in these starving times. His cry was a signal for them to leave the trail and run from henceforth by sight. The gray body seemed to stretch out and he fell into the long, running stride that is the age-old terror of the snow.

At once the whole pack leaped from the

file and ran beside him. They made a compact little body, possibly a dozen wolves, and their wild voices rose in the hunting chorus. It was not the same sound as the chanting bay that Snowbird had heard before. It was a wild frenzied bark, without rhythm or cadence, from every wolfish throat. They were in sight of their game, and the blood lust was upon them.

Then the girl cried for help. The sound was dim and shrill in the silence of the wild. And there were none to hear or to heed. The forest in which she might find safety was still endless miles away. She sped on, and it is true that terrible sobs were clutching at her throat. Now she could hear the beat of paws on the snow behind.

The wolves were so close now that they could hear the shrill cry. But mostly it only served to heighten the fever and madness in their blood. They knew their prey now—a human being, such as they had always feared. But there was no room for fear in their savage hearts. Besides, she was weak and afraid. They could hear her shrill cry, like the bleat of a deer as it falls.

She had turned now at bay. They could see her plainly. Again and again they heard her call—an unanswered cry that died quickly in the silence. And they did not slacken their pace at all.

But there was one of the pack whose response to the girl's shrill cry had been entirely different. Except for the madness that was upon them, the blur and the haze that was over their fire-filled eyes, the wolves might have seen a peculiar, significant change in the attitude of one of their number. That one was Shag.

The voice over the snow found a curious echo in his memory. It was not that in his own life he had ever heard such a call before. Rather it was a call that had sung down to him out of the years, out of the thousands of generations in which his ancestors had been the servants of men. He knew that voice, vibrant and full—the voice that his breed had always listened for and heeded. And now it had a strange quality of distress and terror that moved him to the depths of his nature. It simply seemed to tear his heart to pieces. He didn't consciously know it was a call for help. If he realized the fact at all, it was simply an instinct. It wakened strange memories and desires that were buried deep in the labyrinth of the germ plasm—an instinct that seemed wholly at cross-purposes to all his wilderness training. In the forest, creatures fight their own fights, or else they die. Yet the call awakened an impulse that was even greater than the first law of the forest, that of self-preservation—for he knew that not even his own death must stand between him and the answering of that call. It was an obligation that could not be denied.

And now he was near enough that he could recognize the prey. He knew that tall form, the compelling eyes, the throat white against the dark hair. It was the same form that he had trailed through the thickets that never-to-be-forgotten day in the fall, and for which he had waited, outside a cabin, the whole night. It was his old dream come true again. It was the old friend, lost to him so long, found again. And even now the fellows of his pack were springing upon it, to tear away its life.

At that instant Shag seemed to go mad. He had seemingly been running his fastest before. Now he simply darted, faster than the eye could believe. He did not leap for the girl. He knew, even better than he knew the fact of his own life, that he must die before the fangs of the pack must be allowed to tear the girl. All things else had ceased to matter. One of the great gray wolves was even now leaping for her throat, and Shag had sprung to intercept him in the air.

He never sprang truer. The girl had thrown up her hands to protect her throat, so she did not see the two bodies meet in mid-air. White teeth flashed, tore for an instant at a gray throat, and the wolf and the dog fell together. The wolf did not get up. His jugular vein had been torn like so much paper. But Shag sprang without an instant's pause at the second of the wolves.

The creature died quickly. There was not even a moment's battle. Mad with his blood lust, the gray wolf did not even see him spring. Again Shag whirled, facing the oncoming pack. And they set their feet and slid in the snow.

For the first time, the girl looked up. An instant before, her clean, young soul had been ready for death. There had been no hope. Now two of the largest of the pack lay dead, squarely at her feet. They had died as if from a blast from heaven, in utter silence, without a convulsive movement. And

now the pack was face to face with a great, shaggy, lustrous-coated dog, a savior and a protector in her final moment of need.

She didn't try to understand. She saw the largest of the remaining wolves spring to one side, as if to avoid the dog's fangs, and turn again toward her. But Shag whirled with unbelievable speed and intercepted him. Twice the white fangs flashed, then the dog sprang over the body of a yearling to intercept a young male that was rushing the girl from the rear. The cub reached the girl's body, to be whirled away by her own splendid strength, but the young male died in the air.

The remainder of the pack surged forward, but the dog leaped among them. This was no ordinary fighting. He sprang to the right and left, backward and forward, snapping, recoiling, striking with shoulder and fang and claws. The bewildered wolves struck at him in vain. They tore his burnished coat; but he killed in return. He seemed imbued with the speed of light itself. In the first place, his years of fighting had trained him for just such a battle as this; and, in the second, he was prompted by an impulse more potent and compelling than any he had ever known before.

They closed around him, and he sprang clear and darted after the girl. His instinct was to protect her, not simply to kill her fellows.

And with this fight the battle of the burn came to a sudden end. The remainder of the wolves gave no more of their thought to Shag. Many of their number lay dead in the snow, and it is one of the most hated of the traits of the wolves that they will devour their own mates without compunction. They turned with hideous ferocity upon the bodies of the fallen.

And as for Shag? He was bleeding and torn; but an exultation was upon him such as in all his battles he had never known before. He had found his lost friend, he had fought for her to the death, and he had conquered. All the long trail of his life had pointed to just this moment.

He knew she must never be allowed out of his sight again. He felt the touch of her hand upon his head, and it was a glory and magic that stirred and enraptured him to the roots of his being. Not for nothing had a thousand of his ancestors given their lives and services to men. All his life they had spoken to him through his instincts, and now he had heeded them. Shag had come into his heritage at last.



SILKS AND SATINS

UNABLE to compete with twenty-cent-a-day labor in China, the United States has never been able to do much with silkworm culture, though our climate is admirable for it. So American chemists have perfected the artificial silk industry so that only an expert can tell the imitation from the real thing. By turning wood pulp into viscose worth eight thousand dollars a ton, we enter the world market with something just as good as silk when it comes to looks and better than silk when it comes to wear. For instance, we are exporting yearly some twenty million pairs of wood-silk stockings.

This is causing a lot of scowling in Japan, where a third of the population—eighteen million people—are on the silkworm's pay roll.

The silkworm industry was originated by a woman, wife of Hoang-Ti, third Emperor of China, five thousand three hundred years ago. For centuries silk culture was a closely guarded secret of the Chinese. Long caravans made two-hundred-day journeys from Syria to obtain the silk. Aristotle was the first white man to learn that silk comes from a fluid secreted by a worm. For five hundred years the Greeks and Romans scoffed at his claim and insisted that silk must be a fleece grown on a tree.

Had it not been for silkworms, there might be few negroes in this country to-day. Long ago when silk was scarce in England, James I. gave the Company of Virginia the exclusive right to take African slaves into the Colonies "for the purpose of obtaining cheap labor in the raising of silkworms and cocoons."

The project failed. The plantation owners turned to cotton and continued the importation of slaves.

Charming the Pasteboards

By Hamish McLaurin

Author of "Florrie Springs a New One," "Congo Enjoys the View," Etc.

This is partly a vaudeville tale, and partly of poker playing, and if it has a moral it is that there are some games that cannot be beaten

CHUNG LOO, the Canton Wizard, wrapped his queue around his throat to get it out of the way, shook out a richly brocaded square of black satin—exposing it freely on both sides—and standing in the full glare of the footlights produced from nowhere in particular a huge glass bowl containing a gallon or two of water and several highly disconcerted goldfish. The audience in Porter's Vaudeville Palace was vociferous in its appreciation. This trick had brought to a conclusion some thirty minutes or more of exceptionally mystifying and amusing feats of magic, and as Chung Loo bowed low over his folded hands, his eyes beaming genially through his great horn-rimmed spectacles, the boys handling the olio drop had to raise and lower it three separate times before the applause died out. This was unusual for an act of that sort, and the magician seemed pleased accordingly. As he wended his way toward his dressing room he paused for a word with Gimpy Gavin, the veteran scene shifter at Porter's.

"Nice audience out there to-night, Gimpy," he remarked. "They don't sit on their hands like that Monday night bunch."

"They're nearly always like this of a Saturday," said Gavin, "afternoon *and* evening. The 'show-me' guys all seem to catch the show early in the week. That gang out there to-night came here to be amused."

"They were great to me, all right. I got hands to-night on stuff that they never gave me a tumble on all week."

"That's the way it goes, but at that you got a good act this season, Mr. Allen; one of the best I ever see you do."

From all of which it may be gathered that Chung Loo was no more a Chinaman than Gimpy himself, but merely a first-rate sleight-of-hand man who had been in the business for years and was now putting over the old stuff in a new way.

The stage-door tender, passing at that moment, touched the Canton Wizard on the arm and jerked an indicative thumb in the direction of the latter's dressing room.

"Your friend with the whiskers is in there, Mr. Allen," he informed him. "You know—old Doc Whoozis that was around the other night. I let him in. It was all right, wasn't it?"

"Doctor Blaney, you mean? Sure—sure—any time," and with a good-night nod to Gimpy he hastened down the hall.

Doctor Richard Blaney was a welcome visitor in any wizard's dressing room and to Allen he stood in the light of a particularly good friend. In common with many another professional conjurer he had sat at the feet of this man in days gone by and had learned much that was to his profit, for the doctor, though strictly an amateur, was, perhaps, the most skillful card manipulator of his time. In his capacity as a physician and surgeon he held an assured place in the medical profession, but his reputation in that line was confined principally to the little Connecticut community where he practiced. His fame as a past master in handling "the devil's picture cards" knew no such limitations. It was international in character, and there was hardly a prestidigitator of any consequence on either side of the Atlantic who had not at one time or another paid him the compliment of a pilgrimage to his modest home.

Doctor Blaney's specialty was card tricks. They had fascinated him since boyhood. They were his hobby, his passion, his relaxation from the nervous strain attendant upon his profession. By the time he reached middle age his library contained practically every book or pamphlet on the subject of playing cards then extant, many of them dating back a century or more and most of them long out of print. To him this collection of books meant as much as a collec-

tion of rare paintings means to the elderly connoisseur whose tastes lead him in the direction of art.

His collection of playing cards themselves was also unsurpassed; quaint and clumsy cards from the Oriental countries; daintily printed gems of art made for court use in the seventeenth century; and cards which comprised a veritable history of royal costuming in many lands and many times. In addition to these he had a collection of modern cards which disclosed in amazing fashion the countless methods by which the professional gambler has insured his always "having a shade" on all opponents. "Strippers," "briefs," "readers," pricked cards—any and all devices which the ingenious duplicity of the card sharp has evolved were represented in the cabinets that lined Doctor Blaney's library.

He had taken a fancy to young Chris Allen many years before and they renewed their friendship periodically, whenever the younger man's professional engagements brought him within visiting distance. On this occasion Allen was a little surprised to hear that the doctor was in his dressing room, for he had dropped in during the performance only a night or two previously, and at that time had announced his intention of returning home Saturday morning.

"Well, your Celestial magnificence, how did the honorable act go to-night?" Doctor Blaney greeted him, extending his long, supple fingers to clasp the hand of his quondam pupil.

"Immense," replied Allen, returning the friendly smile and the hearty handshake. "The old bowl of goldfish at the finish pulled three curtains. Sometimes I think everybody in the world must know how that trick's done, but there still seems to be plenty left who don't, thank God."

"Yes, it's a good thing for you they don't all buy books and find out," agreed the doctor. "Still, it's not so strange, either. You'll find that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the person who is interested enough in magic to buy books about it also appreciates its fine points enough not to go around telling everybody what he discovers."

"That's right. It's surprising how few people you run across who take delight in 'exposing' the ordinary sleight-of-hand performer. Of course, with the big illusions it's different."

"Oh, naturally. The man who presents a single spectacular illusion challenges the public to find out how it's done, but I mean the simple little feats of dexterity which have entertained people for centuries. The public at large is quite willing to be puzzled and amused by that kind of a performance and to let it go at that. A majority of people wouldn't thank you to tell them how it's done."

"Bless their hearts for that," said Allen, carefully removing his wig and beginning to undo the tiny knots and frogs which fastened his long mandarin coat; "if everybody made it his business to dope out all my stunts I'd have to go back to work. And speaking of work, I thought you were going home this morning. Anything happened?"

"Well, yes, and likewise no," replied Doctor Blaney; "at least, what happened is nothing to what I hope is going to happen. What would you say if I told you I was going to do a little exposing on my own account?"

"Something to do with cards?"

"Yes, something right in my line."

"I'd say you were trying to kid me. If it were spiritualism, now——"

"No, this is cards. I thought you'd be interested to hear about it; that's why I dropped in. But first let me ask you something: What do you know about the Queensbury Hotel, about the kind of people who make it their headquarters?"

"Well, it's popular with theatrical folks, I think, and with horsemen, and out-of-town buyers and visiting baseball teams—with the sporting fraternity in general, I should say."

"Gamblers?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. I don't happen to know any gamblers who hang out there, but it's just the kind of a place I'd go to look for them."

"I thought so. And now let me tell you what happened last night. For the first time in my life, I think I was taken for a come-on."

Allen lowered the grease rag with which he was taking off his make-up.

"No!" he exclaimed delightedly. "For a card game?"

"Yes, sir, for a card game."

Chris' face was one broad grin, surrounded by a glistening mass of cold cream, yellow paint, and mascara which gave him somewhat the appearance of a P. & O. coal passer coming up for air.

"Oh, doc, that's too good to be true," he

rejoiced. "That's the best I ever heard in my life. Who put it up to you? What did you do?"

"One of the most companionable young gentlemen I have met in a long time. He came and sat down beside me in the lobby of the hotel last night, around eleven o'clock. I had just come in from a show and was glancing over an evening paper before going up to my room. He opened up by asking me for a match, and I must say that his work was extremely good. I never got a chance to look at my paper again; in fact, I found him so entertaining that after a moment or so I folded up the paper and gave him my undivided attention for over half an hour."

"Did he try to pump you about your business and where you came from and all that?"

"Yes, and I let him do it. He was as clever about it as a fortune teller, and if he thinks he drew me out without my knowledge he has a legitimate right to think so. With nine people out of ten he would have been equally successful."

"You gave him a phony name, of course."

"Not at all; I gave him my right name and told him my profession and my home town and everything he wanted to know."

"It's a wonder he didn't rap to you; most people aren't that easy these days."

"I think he did, finally. At least, he saw that I knew he had a reason for scraping an acquaintance with me."

"What did he say?"

"He took the wind out of my sails completely by apparently coming right out into the open. I don't remember just what it was I said that made him shift his tactics, but all at once he leaned over and laid his hand on my arm. 'Doctor,' he said, 'I think this line of talk has gone far enough. You're no sucker; anybody can see that. You're wondering what my game is. Am I right?' He has a most engaging smile, and he was looking me right in the eye. He's a good-looking young scamp, and if he's a crook he must have broken his mother's heart forty times over, because he is quite smart enough to have gone far if he'd been minded to stay on the level.

"I smiled back at him, and said I had just been wondering when he was going to come to the point. He laughed at that—a good, honest-sounding laugh. 'Well, I'm glad we understand each other,' he said. 'You'll excuse me for wasting so much of your time, but I had to feel you out, of course.'

"He glanced around to make sure nobody could overhear him, and then he leaned over the arm of my chair. 'How would you like to sit into a little game of draw?' he asked me. 'Nobody likes a quiet game any better than I do,' I said. 'Ain't that funny?' he said. 'I picked you for a poker player right from the start.' I told him I hardly ever played with strangers, but he said: 'You don't need to be afraid of this game. I know it's on the square, because I run it myself. I don't mind telling you that that's the way I make my living. I know a lot of buyers from out of town who like a little game whenever they come down to New York, and they know they can depend on me to give 'em what they're looking for. It's hard to find a good game these days. Even a lot of the boys around town here have trouble in locating one, but they all know me and they know the cops leave me alone, so in one way or another I manage to keep going. I'm satisfied with the percentage I get from the kitty, but I sit in if they want me to. If I win, all right; if not, well, nobody ever accused me of being a bum loser.' "

"Sounded frank enough, didn't it?" commented Allen. During the doctor's recital he had completed the washing-up process and was now rapidly getting into his street clothes. "Do you suppose he was on the level?"

"About running the game, you mean? Yes, I think he probably was. But about its being a square game and about these 'out-of-town buyers,' and so on—well, you know there aren't any square card games these days, not with professionals in them. They can't play continuously enough. There was a time when a man who ran a card game was satisfied with the usual house percentage, but nowadays the business has become too precarious. It's likely to be a long time between games and he has to make a killing every chance he gets, or he won't clean up enough to tide him over till next time."

"He stopped trying to get you into the game, I suppose, after he saw you were on to him."

"Stop! He never let me go until I had promised to sit in with them to-morrow afternoon. Of course, he wouldn't have landed me if I hadn't wanted to be landed, but if his friends are all as smooth as he is I want to meet them. I might learn something."

"Gee, I'd like to be in on that, doctor.

Don't you think you ought to take somebody along with you? If you show them up they may get ugly, you know. They're not out to lose—not those boys."

"Precisely why I'm here, Chris, my boy; I want you to come along and watch. How long is it since you began using this Chinese make-up?"

"This is only my second season with it."

"Had you played Broadway within a season or two before you appeared as Chung Loo?"

"No, I was West all one season and abroad the year after that. Why?"

"I just wanted to make sure about the chances of any of these men recognizing you. I think it's all right. I don't want you to play, anyway, and I guess they won't object to your looking on. If they do you can sit at the other end of the room and read a paper. I want you there at the finish, that's all."

"Good! I'm not on the bill to-morrow; 'Sunday concert,' you know, and no make-ups allowed. That let's me out. Where are you supposed to meet your friend?"

"In the lobby of the hotel, just after dinner."

"Where's the game?"

"I think it's right in the hotel, from the way he spoke. You better come up to my room first and we'll go downstairs together."

"Right. Shall I bring a gun or a pair of knucks, or anything?"

"Not by any means. There won't be any trouble. I know just what I'm going to do, and I think I know the kind of men I'll be dealing with."

"All right, if you say so; but I wish you'd tell me how you're going after them. I'm about to have a bite of supper now. Won't you come along? Then we can talk this thing over."

The young steerer for the card game lost not a particle of his ingratiating manner when Doctor Blaney presented him to Chris Allen the next afternoon in the hotel lobby.

"Any friend of the doctor's is welcome," he said heartily. "I hope you both had a good dinner?"

"Mine was breakfast," smiled Chris. "I slept late this morning."

"So was mine," admitted Doctor Blaney, "but I hope to make up for it this evening. Mr. Allen has invited me down to his country place for dinner to-night, Mr.——"

"Blondell," supplied the young man quickly.

"Ah, yes—Blondell—I had forgotten—so I will have to be content with what relaxation I can get during the few remaining hours of the afternoon. He wanted to take me down there right away, but I have persuaded him to wait."

"Won't he join us in our—er—relaxation?" suggested Blondell, as they moved toward the elevator.

"No, thanks," said Allen, "I'm not in the doctor's class."

"Oh, is he as good as all that?"

"He's too good for me; that's all I know. I'm afraid of these small-town veterans. Up where he comes from there is a cigar store with a little back room just built for 'relaxation,' as you call it, and I think the doctor began relaxing back there while I was still wearing curls."

"That's just the kind I like to run across," stated the young man, somewhat cryptically; "I know we'll have a pleasant afternoon."

They emerged from the elevator at one of the upper floors and their guide piloted them to a handsomely appointed suite at the end of a long corridor. Two immaculately dressed individuals rose to their feet as Blondell swung the door open and a third joined them a moment later from what appeared to be a bedchamber adjoining the parlor into which they had been ushered. A swift glance of reassurance from the steerer gave them their cue, apparently, and they greeted the two newcomers with impartial affability, though it was palpable to Allen and the doctor that only the latter had been expected.

The first of the trio to be introduced was a tall, bulky, slow-moving man of about thirty-five, whose sparse flaxen hair and ruddy complexion betokened Teutonic blood not many generations back. He was Mr. White. The next was Mr. White's precise contratype; short, spare, and pale, with glistening black hair curling close to his scalp, and a jerky manner which betrayed impairment of his nervous system in some particular. This was Mr. Green. The remaining member of the reception committee was what might have been called a physical compromise between the other two. The solidity of Mr. White had been adjusted, in his case, to a frame but slightly taller than that of Mr. Green. He had Mr. Green's shade of hair but Mr. White's florid complexion. He moved deliberately but spoke with nervous

rapidity—in brief, clipped-off, forceful phrases. And his name was Mr. Brown.

Blondell caught a slight twinkle of amusement in Doctor Blaney's eyes as the last name was pronounced.

"Yes, it's always good for a laugh, that combination of names," he said, relieving his guests of their hats and coats. "They're all old clients of mine, and whenever they happen to sit together the boys say the game is played by the three-color process."

He stepped into the bedroom with the hats and coats, calling over his shoulder a request for Mr. Green to pass the cigars. During the selecting and lighting of these aids to sociability, Doctor Blaney and his companion were quietly taking in the details of the room. They had expected to find it with the lights turned on and the shades down, but it was not. The windows faced south and west, admitting a flood of sunshine, and the room was so high above the street that the view commanded not only an expansive chaos of roofs and chimneys, but glimpses of the North River and the hazy shores beyond. When they first entered the room, the light was cut off in large measure by a gayly embroidered Japanese screen, placed for no apparent reason some five feet or so from the windows. Its purpose became obvious almost immediately, however, for as soon as Blondell returned he folded it up and set it aside, disclosing to view a poker table with five chairs already in position. Producing a rack of chips and several decks of cards from a desk in the corner, he placed them on a small side table and stood back mentally checking over the details of his arrangements in much the same manner as a head waiter surveys the appointments of a private dinner table just before the guests arrive.

"All right, gentlemen," he announced presently, "the stage is set for the matinée. Doctor, will you sit over here?" He indicated the chair with its back to the windows. "I think you'll find that the most comfortable seat."

"Thank you, but if it's all the same, I think I better sit with my back toward the center of the room," returned the doctor blandly. "You see, my friend here wants to look on, and in case I should be fortunate enough to win, I would prefer to have you recall that throughout the game he sat where he could see nobody's hand but my own."

"Suit yourself," acquiesced Blondell as he and the others ranged themsleves around the table, "but I'm sure nothing like that ever entered our heads."

"Possibly not, but I am trying to put myself in your place, gentlemen, and I know that when any strangers come into a game in which I am interested, I always appreciate a strict regard on their part for the etiquette of the game as I understand it. Both for his own protection and out of courtesy to his host, the least the outsider can do is to place himself above suspicion in every way possible."

"Dead right," said Mr. Brown crisply. "No monkey business—no irregularities—just play poker—that's all."

"Then there's no chance for a holler," added Mr. Green.

"Sure; it's the only way," concurred Mr. White. "Not but what your friend could sit anywhere he liked, so far as this bunch is concerned, doctor—everybody here knows how to protect his own hand; you didn't need to worry about that."

"White said something that time," chuckled Blondell as he deftly counted out the several stacks of chips and shoved them in front of the respective players. "These lads play 'em mighty close to the vest, doctor. Every time there's a big pot somebody breaks his watch crystal."

"You see what you're up against, doctor," Chris Allen remarked as he drew a chair up behind Doctor Blaney's. "These gentlemen are evidently going to give you a battle."

"If I hadn't thought so I wouldn't have come," the physician rejoined cheerfully.

"I think you'll find each of us a little better than a raw hand at it," Blondell assured him, taking a seat handy to the side table. "If you take anything away from this gang you earn it, I can promise you that beforehand."

"Fair enough, I'm sure," said Doctor Blaney. "And now, gentlemen, before we go any farther, I want it quite clearly understood that I have to quit at five-thirty—win, lose, or draw. Mr. Allen and I have to catch a six-o'clock train. Is that agreeable to every one?"

"Whatever you say, sir," replied Blondell, speaking for the others. "We had hoped you could make it an all-night session, but if you can't, why, three hours is better than no game; eh, boys?"

"Sure!" agreed the staccato Mr. Brown. "Let's go!"

Blondell tossed a deck of cards across to Doctor Blaney. "Will you do the honors?" he requested. The doctor broke open the packet and fanned the cards apart to inspect them for possible errors in packing at the factory. As he did so, Blondell went on to state the conditions of play.

"We usually play nothing but jack pots," he explained. "Dealer antes for the crowd. Sweeten a dollar all around if the pot isn't opened. Table stakes, and no limit but your conscience."

"Fine," said the doctor, ridding the deck of the joker and beginning to shuffle the remaining cards with studied deliberation. "Up where I come from it rarely happens that all of us have money enough at the same time to start a game like that. When we do, it is known as 'the bucket of blood.'"

His newly made acquaintances smiled at this, but Allen noticed that their eyes never left his hands as he dealt out the cards. Except for an occasional humorous comment on the part of Blondell, all joviality quickly died out of the proceedings and the five players, particularly the exponents of the "three-color process," became almost oppressively monosyllabic. The play progressed with such caution on the part of the contenders and such impartiality on the part of the goddess of chance—in so far as she was concerned in the transaction—that at the end of an hour Blondell was constrained to remark that the chips certainly "had no home" and that good hands were "scarcer than cockeyed trap shooters."

If one man's pile towered any higher than the others it was the one in front of Doctor Blaney, but so far as Allen could determine, this trifling excess of winnings had come to his friend by the natural "breaks in the luck," such as any of his opponents might have experienced without causing the slightest comment. As a matter of fact, at the end of the first half hour Chris decided that this company was a shade too swift for him. If anything crooked had taken place in that time he had failed to observe it, yet he was morally certain that these men had not the remotest intention of permitting Doctor Blaney to win.

From their point of view, he felt certain, the doctor looked like an ideal victim; his close-cropped gray beard, his gold-rimmed spectacles, and his old-fashioned collar and tie gave him an undeniably extra-urban appearance; the comparative ease with which Blondell had induced him to come into the game was evidence of a trusting nature; his obvious familiarity with poker stamped him as a lover of the game, a shrewd player, but undoubtedly an honest one. With the gambler's usual skill at estimating human characteristics, they probably had decided that, given good hands, this man would back them for all they were worth, and if other hands turned out to be a shade better than his, he would not be the one to complain.

For all these reasons Allen was waiting with intense interest for something to happen which he could lay his finger upon as being accomplished by connivance, trick, or artifice of some description or other. To his secret embarrassment he could detect nothing of the sort. Professional conjurers are commonly credited with an ability to perform marvels of deception during a game of cards, provided they choose to exercise their powers, but with a vast majority of them such is not the case. The feats they present on the stage or in the drawing-room demand a certain flourish, a considerable degree of uncertainty on the part of the audience as to what is coming next, and a great deal of effort intended to distract the attention of the onlookers away from the cards. None of these conditions obtains at the card table. Any move uncalled for by the simple processes of shuffling, cutting, and dealing is just cause for suspicion. The routine processes of distributing and discarding the hands is so fixed by custom that every one at the table knows precisely what the next move should be and what it must be if the person handling the cards is playing a square game. Let the dealer too frequently call attention to something in another part of the room or switch from one style of handling the cards to another, and he will soon find himself experiencing great difficulty in getting anybody to play with him.

For this reason the professional "advantage player," as he chooses to call himself, has been forced to develop methods of cheating which so closely resemble the honest manipulation of the cards that not even a person familiar with the moves he employs will be able to detect them. In other words, the sure-thing gambler, when he shuffles, cuts, and deals the cards honestly, must do so with the identical motions he employs

when the shuffler arranges the hands to his advantage, the cut is a false one, and the deal crooked. To do this demands a higher type of skill than that required by the average sleight-of-hand trick, and the gamblers who attain to any proficiency in the art are not many. The conjurers and illusionists who can successfully duplicate these gamblers' tricks are found still more infrequently. Doctor Blaney was one of the few. For his own satisfaction he had taken steps to learn the subtle sleights of the card sharp, to attain high proficiency in them, and, as was his invariable custom, to elaborate upon them until what he could do with a deck of playing cards while every eye around the table was fixed on his hands became something approaching the supernatural.

Therefore Chris, as he sat back of Doctor Blaney's chair, watching the ebb and flow of fortune, had a tantalizing conviction that, not only his friend, but the other four men at the table were actually controlling the value of hand after hand by methods which even his trained eye could not follow. He knew that quite apart from whatever skill the other players might possess, they always could place the doctor at a disadvantage by resorting to team play. When one of them chanced to hold a strong hand and the doctor elected to come in against him, it was a simple matter for the gambler to signal one of his friends to raise the pot repeatedly until the doctor either dropped out or risked calling. The man who got the signal might have nothing in his hand to justify his raising, and, of course, on the surface of things he would lose heavily to his friend, but the presumption was that they would divide their winnings after the game anyhow, and in the meantime the doctor would have been forced to put far more money into the pot than he might have done had there been but one hand betting against him.

As the second hour of play progressed, it seemed to Allen that the professionals were using this system more and more, and an excellent strategy it was—whenever an opponent's hand turned out to be better than the doctor's. To Allen's inward delight, however, it happened more often than not that when the "cross-lifting" process had been completed the cards held by Doctor Blaney proved to be just a little stronger than Mr. Brown's, Mr. Green's, or Mr. White's, as the case might be. He was more than holding his own and, though from time to time his stack of chips dwindled appreciably, it seemed to have an uncanny faculty of recuperation.

On each occasion when the doctor barely topped a hand which his opponent had backed with every show of absolute confidence, Allen watched the face of the discomfited adversary narrowly, expecting always to note signs of exasperation. He was invariably disappointed. No matter how heavy the loss, each of Mr. Blondell's "clients," as well as Blondell himself, accepted it quite unperturbed. Allen would gladly have credited them with remarkable gameness and good nature, had he not felt intuitively that all four of them were "lying back," awaiting the proper moment for some predetermined plan to be put into effect.

The last half hour brought out some feverish betting. Even Blondell lost something of his geniality and permitted a trace of hardness to creep into his voice. He and his associates saw their victim slipping out of the snare, so Chris surmised, and they were fighting with every resource at their command to get back at least what they had lost to this thrice-blessed and triple-armored son of Good Fortune whom they had lured into their midst. Giving them as good as they sent, betting them off their feet when he knew the cards had fallen the way he intended, and gracefully backing down when he divined that his opponents had placed themselves in a position of similar advantage, Doctor Blaney fought back like the past master he was. Outguessed, outmaneuvered, and outplayed at every point, the gamesters were forced with relentless regularity to increase the pile of chips in front of the doctor at the expense of their own sadly diminished stacks.

At twenty-five minutes past five Blondell, at Doctor Blaney's left, picked up the cards and prepared to deal. The doctor glanced at his watch.

"Gentlemen, this will have to be the last round," he announced. "Pleasant and profitable as the afternoon has been for me, and much as I should like to continue, I must stick to my agreement. The round will finish with me; is that all right with everybody?"

"I'm satisfied," stated Mr. White with an air bordering on relief.

"Same here," said Mr. Green, scratching his head and gazing a bit ruefully at the in-

significant heap of white chips in front of him.

"Shoot!" grunted Mr. Brown, his eyes fixed on Blondell.

"All right, boys and girls," said the dealer cheerfully, "we're at the stretch. Bite 'em, doc; I'm for you."

"Now it's coming; now it's coming," thought Chris Allen, and he shifted slightly to get a better view of the table. The doctor had something like seven hundred dollars in front of him, as nearly as Chris could judge, and he felt that if trouble were on the way it was bound to materialize within the next few moments.

Blondell finished dealing and the players "skinned" their hands. Nobody opened. The pot was sweetened and the deal passed to Mr. White. Again no openers.

"Fattening up the pot for the killing," Allen decided mentally.

The cards passed to Mr. Green and he dealt them, with the same twitching movements which had marked his play throughout the game.

"Green must be the baby they're banking on," said Chris to himself. His suspicions were intensified the next moment when Mr. Brown opened, "under the gat."

"Aha; I thought so," Chris commented inwardly. "Now it commences."

But if it commenced it failed to finish, for the doctor promptly gave the pot a fifty-dollar tilt, whereat Mr. Brown departed from the sequence of play for the first time in the game by snorting violently, displaying his openers, and tossing his hand disgustedly into the discard without waiting to hear what anybody else was going to do.

Nobody else was interested, as it happened, and it became Mr. Brown's deal. He performed the office in most perfunctory fashion, Allen watching him the while with great glee in his heart.

"They're quitting; they're lying down; the doc's got 'em buffaloed," he gloated.

Such in truth seemed to be the case, for nobody opened the pot on Mr. Brown's deal, and the cards came to Doctor Blaney without a struggle.

"Well, I must say this has been far from a Garrison finish, up to date," commented the doctor as he gathered in the discard; "Chris, my boy, send up a little prayer for me and see if we can't start something this time. This is the last hand, gentlemen, and your last chance for revenge."

As he talked he shuffled the cards with what seemed like unusual deliberation, adding one or two extra riffles "for luck" as he put it. When the players scanned their cards after the deal, it seemed to Chris that the silence which fell upon them was heavier than at any time during the afternoon. Their first glance was verified in each case by a second, and Mr. Brown was even seen to run his thumb over the corners of his cards a third time, as if he suspected that his eyesight was playing him false. Then four impassive faces were raised, and every one's gaze centered upon Blondell, whose turn it was to speak.

"Nope," he said, his eyes darting swiftly around the circle of faces. "Not where I'm sitting."

"By me," said Mr. White.

"By me," repeated Mr. Green.

Mr. Brown simply rapped his cards on the table and waited with the rest for the next move on the part of Doctor Blaney.

"The dealer goes after his ante by opening for ten dollars," announced the guest of honor, shoving in the necessary chips. "There you are, gentlemen; I'm letting you in cheap. It will cost you only ten dollars."

"It won't cost me ten cents," declared Blondell, "nor ten pants' buttons, nor ten soap bubbles, nor ten anything. I'm cured," and he carefully laid his cards on the table in front of him.

"Nor me," added Mr. White, following suit.

"Same here," chimed in Mr. Green, and he, too, refrained from tossing his hand into the center of the table.

Chris Allen leaned forward, inwardly quivering with excitement.

"They're on," he thought, with a thrill of apprehension. "They're on at last. Now for the rough stuff." He put his hand quietly behind him and grasped the back of his chair, ready to swing it where it would do the most good in the event of trouble.

It was up to Mr. Brown to say the final word. Mr. Brown seemed to be considering. He scrutinized his cards once again, after Mr. Green dropped out, fingered his few remaining chips tentatively, then brushed them aside and came to a decision. The moment he spoke it was plain that the game was over. He had relaxed completely from the state of well-controlled nervous tension he had displayed up to that moment, and for

the first time his words came slowly and distinctly.

"With the hand I've got I'd ought to bet a million," he asserted, "but not against you, doctor. You're too good. This is the best hand I've held this afternoon, but I wouldn't give a secondhand chew of gum for my chances of making it stand up. Take back your ante, sir; you win by a large majority."

He laid down his cards and folded his arms.

"No customers?" inquired Doctor Blaney, pausing for a moment before raking in his chips. "Then I'm sorry for you, gentlemen. That was your golden opportunity. Here's the pair of queens I opened on and"—laying three low cards beside them—"that was all I had."

His opponents stared at the cards, glanced up at the doctor, then shook their heads resignedly and looked at each other with mournful smiles.

"And now, Mr. Blondell," went on the doctor briskly, "I'm sure you won't mind if I ask you to let me cash in at once. I mustn't keep Mr. Allen waiting any longer."

"Right you are, doctor. How much have you got there?"

With Allen's assistance, Doctor Blaney quickly counted up his chips and Blondell checked them off as he put them in the rack.

"Six hundred and eighty-five dollars," he announced when the count was completed. "That will go quite a ways in the old home town, doctor."

With seemingly perfect good nature he reached into an inner coat pocket, produced a leather wallet, and began to count off a stack of bills on to the table. Doctor Blaney watched him in silence, with Chris at his elbow. When the last bank note had been added to the pile, the winner picked it up, evened up the ends, and stood holding it in his hands.

"Gentlemen," he said, his eyes dancing mischievously behind his glasses, "if I ever earned any money in my life I think I earned this. I wish I could keep it—but I can't. I admire your gameness, but I am quite amply repaid by the fun I have had. There's your money."

He tossed the bank notes back on to the table.

"Not on your life," cried Blondell, gathering up the money again and snapping an elastic band around it. "What kind of pikers do you think we are, anyhow? Here, the dough is yours. You won it. Take it."

The doctor waved him back.

"No, boys, it wouldn't be right. You don't understand. I can't very well introduce myself, but my friend here can do it for me. First let me present him to you, in the character he has made famous. Mr. Allen, gentlemen, is known on the stage as Chung Loo, the Canton Wizard."

A slow grin dawned on the faces of the four professionals.

"Well, I'll be darned," ejaculated Mr. White. "*Two* of 'em, boys. Wouldn't that scald you?"

Doctor Blaney and the Canton Wizard had a sudden strange feeling of uncertainty. The men in front of them were far more at their ease than one would have thought, all things considered. Chris hastened to "give them the other barrel."

"And Doctor Blaney, as every magician in the business can tell you, is the cleverest card manipulator in the world, bar none," he informed them, with all the impressiveness he could command.

The only effect was to broaden still further the grins on the four faces around the table.

"Sure he is," agreed Blondell with high good humor. "And we knew it all the time. That's why we got him into this game. We've been hearing about him for years, and we figured if we could ever get him at a table with us some time we might pick up a few things worth knowing."

Doctor Blaney's face was a study.

"Last week I went up to the old home burg to look you up, doctor," continued Blondell. "I wanted to look you over and sound you out, but they told me you had come down to New York and were stopping right here at this hotel. What could be sweeter? We figured you to sit in this way and try to show us up, and when it comes to that I'll say you did show us up, to the queen's own royal taste, but what we picked up by watching you this afternoon is going to be worth millions to us, believe me. That's why we can't take back the money, doctor. The dope we got was cheap at twice the price. No argument, now. You earned it, as you said, and if you don't want it you can give it to a hospital or something."

In vain Doctor Blaney tried to refuse. The crafty quartet would have none of it, and when he and Chris departed a few moments later the roll of bills was in his pocket

and the parting laughter of the gamblers was in their ears.

"It's even up," Blondell had said as he opened the door for them. "We put one over on you, all, right; but, man, we take off our hats to you when it comes to charming the pasteboards. If I hadn't seen you deal us those four sets of fours on that last hand I'd have said it couldn't be done. You've set a new mark for us to shoot at, doctor, and when we practice up a little we'll make some of these sure-thing boys look foolish. So long. Glad you came."

"Well, Chris, my boy," said the doctor as they waited for the elevator, "I'm blessed if *I* know whom the laugh is on. Do you?"

"If I had six hundred and eighty-five dollars in my pocket I wouldn't care who did the laughing," replied Allen. "I think I could scare up a snicker or two, all right."

"I presume that's the only way to look at it," agreed the doctor, somewhat reluctantly. "Suppose we go around the corner to the Olde Chop House and do our smiling at the dinner table. I am extremely fond of the food there, and for once I can disregard the prices."

It was, perhaps, two hours later when Doctor Blaney leaned back comfortably on his padded leather seat at the chop house and asked the waiter what was the most expensive cigar the place kept in stock. The waiter believed they had some as high as a dollar and a half apiece.

"Excellent," said the doctor. "Bring us two of those and then let me have the check."

It had been a regal dinner. The doctor was something of an epicure, and to his young friend the occasion had been one in a lifetime. Liqueurs had been ordered, and when the cigars arrived and the check had been paid with a bank note from his afternoon's winnings, Doctor Blaney raised his tiny glass and smiled over it at his guest.

"Here's to our charming hosts," he said. "A delightful set of rascals, but artful—very, very artful."

"They were all of that," assented Chris. "Do you know, doctor, I watched every move they made, and I'll swear I couldn't catch them doing anything crooked."

"For the very good reason that they scarcely attempted anything of the sort all afternoon," the doctor enlightened him. "I couldn't understand it at the time. Now I see that they were there to learn something—not to exercise their own adroitness. They were afraid I would detect them, and they didn't want me to quit the game. Perhaps half a dozen hands they dealt were open to suspicion, hardly more. For the rest of the time they contented themselves with keeping down their losses by 'getting me between them' occasionally and raising me clear out of the pot."

At this moment the waiter returned with the bank note the doctor had given him and laid it on the table with an air of profound apology.

"Very sorry, sir," he said in a low voice, "but the cashier says this here bill is no good."

"What!" gasped the two men in unison.

"Yes, sir. Some mistake, sir, of course."

"Mistake! I should say there was. Here"—and the doctor took another bill from the roll—"give him that one."

The waiter took the bill and surveyed it.

"Suppose you come up to the desk, sir," he suggested.

Without a word Doctor Blaney rose and threaded his way between the tables in the wake of the waiter, Chris following close on his heels. On the way they encountered the proprietor, whom the doctor had known for years. The physician handed him the roll of bank notes.

"Here; have your cashier look these over, will you? All of them."

The proprietor having been apprised of the situation, they grouped themselves around the cashier's desk while that careful old gentleman went through the pile of bills, one by one.

"I'd advise you to throw them away, sir," was his verdict. "There's not a good one in the lot."

"Throw them away yourself," replied the doctor, and with a wry smile at his guest he reached for his pocketbook. In silence he waited for his change and in silence he and Chris donned their overcoats and proceeded up the street. As they came within sight of his hotel the doctor cast his eyes aloft at a corner room on one of the upper floors, facing south and west.

"Yes, Chris, my boy," he said. "As I told you just now, they're an artful outfit—very, very artful."



The Stayer

By Hal G. Evarts

Author of "The Tawny Menace," Etc.

"Hardpan was always a good camp," said the man who stayed, but he never dreamed of the manner in which his faith would be rewarded. A picture of both the old and the new West

THERE was the usual sudden quiet as the rattle of the ivory ball ceased.

"Double O in the green," said the croupier.

"Double O in the green," the lookout repeated by way of verification.

"Men, the sweet-pea-green shade is the bank's per cent," the croupier chanted. "This time the house wins and the gamblers lose. Lay your bets for the next turn. The little ivory ball—watch it again!"

There was a soft clatter of chips as the players placed their bets, some scattering the chips promiscuously over the layout while others followed some pet system of their own and covered the board with care.

The tall man with the drooping gray mustache manipulated a stack of yellow chips from right hand to left, stringing them out as if playing an accordion. He placed a twenty-five-dollar chip on number twenty, straight up, and cornered the bet four ways for a like amount. In the square marked "Second twelve numbers" he bet fifty and the same on the middle column. On both the even and the black he dropped four yellow chips.

"He's a stayer," said a voice from the edge of the crowd. "The same combination for the limit at every turn."

Curious eyes turned to view the stranger who had come to Hardpan. Soon or late each newcomer divulged his presence in camp by making that same wondering comment about that which was as commonplace as sunshine to the rest of them.

Each night of the year Sam Lang played that same combination for the limit at every turn of the wheel.

"She spins!" said the croupier, twirling the delicately balanced roulette wheel and expertly snapping the little ivory ball in the opposite direction. "She's off again on the giddy whirl."

The ball spun around the wheel, trembled into number seven and darted out again, flirted with single O in the green and passed it by, settling solidly into a pocket at last.

"Twenty in the black," said the croupier.

"Twenty in the black," echoed the lookout.

"Twenty pays. The black wins over the red and the even beats the odd," the croupier chanted. "The second twelve loses for the house and the middle column wins for the gamblers. It's tough but true that the house can't make an honest living against luck and science. Hands off the board, men, until the bets are paid."

As he talked he raked in the losing bets and cashed the winners, pushing five stacks of yellow chips to Lang.

A tall, powerful man with crisp, black hair and mustache touched Lang's arm.

"Time's up, Sam," he said. "It's twelve o'clock straight up."

Lang nodded and swept his pile of chips to the other.

"Cash those in for me, Jim," he said, and without even pausing for a glance at the groups around the crap table and the faro layout, he left the crowded hall.

Hardpan was a mushroom boom camp.

As Lang passed down the street he was hailed familiarly by every man, for Samuel Rutherford Lang, better known as Hardpan Lang, was the man who had brought the town into being. It was Lang who had located the rich ledge in the barren foothills where no other thought to search. There was a mad rush for the spot.

The Union Pacific, swinging in a wide curve, touched the base of the ridge where a spur of the foothills met the flats, three miles below the outcropping vein. Here a camp sprang up almost overnight.

One short week after the strike was made, laborers were building a railroad station and a siding in the point of the loop. Flimsy frame shacks were being hastily thrown up to replace the tents. Crowds of men swarmed

off of every train; each trail that led down out of the hills was worn deep by the travel of those who came on horses, burros, or on foot. Although it was a quartz find, the mob of gold seekers poured over the hills and staked every foot of ground, burrowing and scratching for free gold. They found it, only in scattered pockets, but these were rich, and Hardpan scrambled on it its wild rush to prosperity.

Eastern promoters formed the Rainbow Mining Company to mine Lang's ledge, and Lang himself was left with nothing to do but stroll about the camp, acting the rôle of bonanza king and drawing heavily against the company when in need of money.

Early in the rise of the camp he bought the Palace Hotel. His system of managing this property was more in the nature of pleasure than business. Every flat-broke prospector that appeared was cordially assured that he had a place to sleep and eat for as long as Lang was owner of the Palace. Even then it was necessarily profitable. Two dollars a meal and five for a bed was the Palace scale of prices, and after even the cots in the halls were gone, each night, scores were turned away.

There was but one established custom about running the Palace. Lang felt that he should never neglect the duties of host by absenting himself from the Palace when his guests were ready to retire. By midnight there were generally some few who were ready to call it a day and turn in.

Each night of the year, when the hands of his watch pointed to the hour, big Jim Riley, proprietor of the Gilded Eagle, would saunter to the roulette layout and call Lang's attention to the fact. Win, lose, or draw, Lang never failed to sweep his chips to Riley, who cashed them in and made a mental note of the amount. At one minute after twelve Lang could be found behind the Palace register, ready to bid each guest good night.

Then, like all boom camps, Hardpan had its wild, brief day of prosperity and passed. No more pockets of free gold were found.

Expert geologists searched for the lost vein. One and all rendered the same verdict; some upheaval had faulted the structure of the rocks and forced this bit from the main ledge. Their efforts were unavailing. It appeared to be but a bastard ledge, set down in the gravelly soil of the foothills by some convulsion of nature and leaving no trace of the parent strain.

The geologists continued to search but the Rainbow Mining Company shut down and Hardpan started swiftly upon its toboggan slide from fame to oblivion.

As the drifting population departed, the rooms at the Palace were no longer full. Each night there were ever increasing numbers of those who had scratched in the hills until their last dollar was gone and who now turned up and asked for credit at the Palace. To each in turn Sam Lang made his staple reply:

"As long as I own the Palace you've got a place to sleep and eat until your luck changes and you get on your feet."

A month after the company shut down Lang received notice that he could draw no more against it until the final winding up of its affairs had determined how much, if any, was due him.

In another month the population of Hardpan had fallen from five thousand to twoscore, and the majority of those were free boarders at the Palace. The descent of a mushroom camp is swift and pitiless.

The merchants, saloon and dance-hall men had gone, taking their stocks with them. Boom-town operators one and all, they would not linger in a dead camp.

With all this cumulative evidence Lang would not give up. Others might go, but not Lang. Hardpan was his town. He had made it and he still had faith in it. Hardpan was a stayer.

To each man that departed Lang made the same parting speech as he grasped his hand in farewell.

"You're making a mistake," he would say. "A big mistake. Hardpan is a good camp—the best. When you get ready to come back don't forget you've always got a place to sleep and eat for as long as I'm owner of the Palace."

One after another came to Lang when they went broke, bartering their holdings in Hardpan for the price to get away. A hundred dollars would buy a frame shack and half a block of ground in the residence part of town. Those who still remained played poker, putting up their places in lieu of cash and eventually the biggest winner traded an assortment consisting of a dozen shacks and four square blocks of ground for a hundred dollars in gold—Lang's last hundred.

Big Jim Riley still lingered. He could afford to wait. Boom camps only could attract him. The Golden Eagle stood dismantled. The bar fixtures and bottled goods, the roulette and faro layouts, crap and stud-poker tables all stood crated for shipment and would stand until another strike was made. His men were scattered as scouts, waiting to send the word, and, meanwhile, Riley waited calmly in Hardpan, visiting with the few who remained at the Palace.

Then one night "Corky" Clark, croupier of roulette, dropped from a train with tidings of the big strike five hundred miles to the south and west. He had already purchased a lot and men were working on the building in front of which Riley's great wooden figure of the Gilded Eagle would soon swing.

"It's time to go, Sam," Riley said to Lang. "They've struck it big in Nevada! Corky says it's a whirlwind. It's time for you and me to go."

"Not me, Jim," Lang answered. "Hardpan's too good a camp for me to ever leave it."

"Are you broke, Sam?" Riley asked.

"No," said Lang. "Not broke, Jim. I'm out of ready money until the company resumes business, but that won't last long. They'll start up again pretty soon."

Riley dropped a heavy sack that clinked upon the Palace counter.

"There's a thousand or two in there to keep you going until they start up again, Sam," he said.

"Thanks for the loan, Jim," said Lang. "But you're making a mistake to go. A big mistake. Hardpan's a good camp, Jim."

The Union Pacific closed the station and locked the siding switch. Better methods of railroading were being studied. All over the country engineers were cutting, filling, trestling, and tunneling to eliminate the crazy curves of the Western roads. Six months after the ledge played out the new roadbed was completed across the mouth of the Hardpan curve and the Union Pacific trains rolled past eight miles away, leaving Hardpan an isolated, dead spot in the point of the old loop.

Then the last remaining citizen of Hardpan, besides Lang, pulled out. Bill Wade, liveryman, was no speculator, but a plodder. There seemed to be no more livery business in prospect for Hardpan, and at last his slow-working brain told him that it was time to go.

From the slender store Riley had given him, Lang paid fifty dollars gold for Wade's barn and feed lots and a quarter section of grazing land in the flat below the camp.

Wade hitched up his teams, tying each team to the rig ahead, and mounting the seat of the first one, he cracked his whip over the lead team and the crazy cavalcade twisted down the dusty road.

Lang watched him go, shaking his head over the mistake Bill Wade was making, and then started for the hills to continue his constant search for the missing vein.

"I'll find it," he said, "and then all the boys will come back."

That one thought stayed with him, and all through the years Lang never once doubted that Hardpan would one day revive and be the same old camp it had been in the wild boom days. Time ceased to have a meaning for him in his absorbing search for the faulted ledge.

Mining became more scientific and less wasteful. New cyanide processes were invented for milling and extracting the last grain of gold from low-grade ore. Every few years Lang met some geologist whose company had sent him to assay samples of the old Rainbow dump with a view of running the one-time refuse through a cyanide mill if the percentage was large enough to pay. Each succeeding one reported unfavorably to his company.

The Union Pacific had junked the loop and only the road had remained.

The Rainbow Company in its final accounting had sent Lang his pro-rata share. He could no longer play the limit each roll of the wheel, because the wheel was no longer there, and aside from roulette his wants were few and simple.

Property in Hardpan was sold for taxes. Naturally the valuations in a dead town were small, the taxes but a few cents each year, but no single soul who had left Hardpan behind him would think of paying a cent. Each year Lang went to the county seat and paid the tax until eventually he was given a tax title to every piece in town. It was lumped in one certificate from then on, and the taxes on the whole townsite and two adjoining quarters cost Lang less than fifty dollars a year. He was sole owner of the camp he had started. Hardpan was a one-man town.

While Lang patiently scoured the hills for the mother lode the rest of the world made seven-league strides of progress.

Automobiles had come into being, passed the experimental stage, and then came finally into common use. In place of the one-time mule teams and lumbering oxen yoked to the white-topped prairie schooner, roadsters and touring cars of all the shades of the sunset now purred swiftly over the ever-increasing network of Western roads.

Thereafter, thousands of tourists speculated idly upon the past of the deserted camp as their cars rolled smoothly past the town of Hardpan. The scene was one of desolation; the gaping windows and sagging roofs mocked at the hopes of men and stood there as monuments of dead ambitions.

Alone of all the buildings, the Palace was still whole. True, the aged weatherboarding was warped in places and the veranda sagged dejectedly at either end, but the windows and doors were intact. Lang had replaced breakages at the expense of other buildings. Inside, the furniture still stood in every room, although time and dry rot had long since turned the covering of the straw ticks as tender as tissue paper.

After a lapse of fifteen years a geologist again turned up in Hardpan. Even before the visit of the last one fifteen years in the past, Lang had decided that no geologist would ever find the ledge. They weren't persistent enough. They merely looked at surface indications, while Lang, after exhausting these, had tunneled into the face of every hill. He asked this one if he was there with a view to assaying the old mine dump or to trace the faulted structure.

The young man gazed at him in surprise. What did this very old man know of geological structures? He explained that the dump held no interest for him.

"The structure is certainly faulted, too," he said, "but me, I'm going to locate that fault."

"I hope you do, son," said Lang. "I hope you do. It'll put the old camp back on her feet again and the boys will be coming back."

"They'll come fast enough if I strike it," Bruce Arnold prophesied. "They'll blow in like blackbirds going to roost."

"That's the way they always do when a strike is made, son," Lang agreed. "That's the way they come. Just as thick as blackbirds."

"They haven't brought in any big ones out here, but this Wyoming stuff is all high-grade crude," Arnold said.

"Highest in the world," Lang answered enthusiastically, "and the Hardpan ledge was the highest grade of all. She run four hundred to the ton. That's the living truth, son, four hundred to the ton is what she made. That's what you'll find, boy, if you strike it."

The young geologist smiled.

"Two hundred barrels a day will suit me fine," he said. "And I'll stake my reputation as a geologist that it's around here somewhere."

Here at last was a man who believed in the future of Hardpan. Lang patted him on the shoulder.

"It's around here, son. I've always said so," he said earnestly. "Someway I've got a great, big, life-sized hunch that you're the one that'll uncover it. I hope so. Sometimes I've actually begun to doubt that I'd ever find it and see the old camp boom again. But you'll find it, son. And, in the meantime, don't forget you've always got a place to sleep and eat as long as I'm running the Palace."

Bruce Arnold thanked him and went on. For two weeks he skirted the foothills for miles in either direction. Then he came back to Hardpan and waited for Lang to come back from his daily trip to the hills.

"Can you tell me who owns that land?" he asked, pointing to the flat below the town. "If you know, it'll save me an extra trip to the county seat to look up the records."

"Two-quarters of it is mine," said Lang. "The balance is government land. The closest half seotion is mine."

"The hell it is!" said Arnold.

He thought for several minutes before referring to it again.

"What kind of a price have you got on it?" he asked.

Lang had no price.

"I haven't any particular use for money right now," he said. "I don't know of any sounder investment than to keep what I got in Hardpan property. She was always a good camp."

Arnold sounded him on the subject of leasing, but found that Lang was as stubbornly opposed to tying up his property with a lease as to selling.

"I see your drift, son," Lang said. "Most all of the geologists that was out here some

time back thought that the ledge had been pushed down out of the hills by that upheaval they spoke of. You're going at it from the other end. You think it was nosed up out of the ground and that the main lode is under the flat. It sounds reasonable, too. Your theory is a good one, sonny. I don't know but what I incline to it a little myself.

"Tell you what, boy; I don't know as I care to lease or sell any of my Hardpan property, but if you want to sink a shaft out in that flat, you go to it. You can ask any man and he'll tell you that Sam Lang is on the square. If you strike it, you can have the biggest part of what you find."

Bruce Arnold was a purposeful young man. When he wanted anything he went after it from all angles. He quizzed various people around the country and learned a great deal about the history of Hardpan Lang. Armed with these facts, he came back.

"Sam," he said, "the rest of the land around here is open grazing land—government land. There's been a law passed that the government will only lease one-quarter section to any one company to sink the kind of a shaft I want to put down. You can't lease a big block of land from the government like you can where it's privately owned, deeded land. One-quarter is all, and you have to put up a ten-thousand-dollar guarantee to drill within a certain specified time."

"I've been breaking the law without ever knowing it for forty years," said Lang. "I've drove a tunnel into the face of every hill within ten miles without ever putting up a cent."

"You can still do that kind of prospecting, Sam, but not on the kind of government mineral lease I want, or sink the kind of a well I want to put down. I haven't got the ten thousand to put up as a guarantee, and I can't organize a company without a lease. The blue-sky law won't let me. Your half section is the only deeded land for miles.

"Now, my idea is this: We'll organize a company. We'll call it the Rainbow Mining Company. There's no better name anywhere than that! You'll have your interest in the company the same as you did before. You'll still own the land—merely lease it to the company for one-eighth the output. One barrel out of every eight; one dollar out of every eight the company earns is yours. When we strike it there'll be thousands of men ready to put up the ten thousand guarantee for every quarter.

"Why, Sam, those birds will swarm in here and just naturally fight for every square inch of land for miles. It'll be one grand rush—one hair-raising, mad stampede. It'll put Hardpan on its feet! She'll be a good camp again—better than ever before. What do you say, Sam? Shall we call it a deal? Let's put Hardpan on the map."

"It's a deal," Lang said, extending his hand. "It's a deal. Shake, son."

Arnold shook. Then he produced a lease that was already properly drawn up and pushed Lang a fountain pen.

"Sign here, Sam," he said.

Bruce Arnold had many friends who believed in him as a geologist. Also he believed in himself, had confidence in his project, and was a high-pressure salesman of the first rank. In less than two months he had raised sufficient capital to sink three wells.

As Lang came back from the hills one evening, he saw a tractor snorting down the road, towing a huge machine in its wake. It turned off and rumbled out into the flat.

Arnold was waiting for him at the Palace.

"There's the rig, Sam," he greeted. "She's on the ground. We're off!"

"Is that some new kind of a hoist, Bruce?" Lang inquired.

"The newest thing in hoists," Arnold laughed. "The very latest wrinkle, Sam."

"I'll be down and watch her work when you get her started off," said Lang. "I'm drivin' a new tunnel that takes most all of my time, but I'll lay off one of these days and look her over."

It was a week before he really felt that he could spare the time from the new drift he had started. He felt sure that this latest one was right, but eventually he took a few hours off to look over Bruce's machine.

Lang silently watched the working of the rig. Arnold explained that a two-ton steel bit was attached to the cable and that the swinging beam lifted it up and let it drop, churning out the hole.

"I see, son," Lang nodded. "That outfit saves a pile of work. You sink a hole until you strike the ledge and then you know right where to open her up."

Day after day the beam swung the great bit and deepened the hole. Trucks brought loads of twelve-inch casing to the flat. The

drillers had their own cook wagon with them and Lang, ever busy back in the hills, saw but little of them.

Each day Arnold made tests of the rubble that came from the hole. Lang had small faith in this sort of analysis and occasionally he got out his old, shallow gold pan and carefully washed a quart or two of the stuff to help the younger man out. But he found no trace of gold.

When Arnold told him one day that the well was down eighteen hundred feet, Lang shook his head.

"You've missed her, son," he said. "Better pull her up and start somewheres else. The ledge can't be that deep. Even if you did strike it down that far we'd never be able to open it up. We couldn't get down to it. Better make another set."

"We won't have to get down to it, Sam; it'll come up to us," Arnold said. "Twenty-two hundred feet ought to put us into the sands."

Lang was increasingly skeptical but Arnold's eyes had the same glitter in them that Sam Lang's eyes once had when the wheel spun in the Gilded Eagle and he played the limit at every turn. Arnold was playing the limit on a wildcat now.

"Twenty-one hundred feet, Sam," he said one night. "The next few days will tell the story. It's now or not at all."

The next evening as Lang came from the hills and rounded the corner of the Palace he heard a sudden clamor of shouts from the flat. There was a hissing, gurgling sound.

He could see men running across the flat toward the bend in the old railroad grade where it had been filled across the flat, and from the mouth of the hole a stream of liquid fountained and gushed.

"They've struck water and flooded Bruce's shaft," Lang said regretfully. "Too bad! Gad! They must have tapped a mud spring. That's a bilious-lookin' stream, sure enough!"

As he started for the flat one of the men passed him on the run.

"All we've got to do is to dam that culvert under the road," he shouted. "That old embankment will make a reservoir that'll hold a million barrels!"

Bruce Arnold came running to meet him. He grabbed Lang by the arm, propelling him toward his roadster that stood in the road.

"Come on, Sam," he said, "you and me are going to make one lightning trip to the county seat."

"I'm going to stay right here and try to turn that damn thing off," said Lang. "That slimy mess will ruin the whole west quarter if we don't choke her quick. Let's sink a few sticks of giant in her and cave the hole."

"I'll get a cap for her as soon as we get to town. That'll throttle her down, Sam. Crawl up in the front seat there, old partner, and we're off with a bang. I'll tell you all about it on the way.

"We're rich, Sam," Arnold said as the car streaked down the Hardpan curve. "That's better than gold. That's oil—high-grade crude at that, and she'll run three thousand barrels if she's squirting a pint. I've got six men at the county seat with ten thousand apiece to file on six government quarters and put up the guarantees. That's the beauty of a wildcat well in government territory. The speculators won't put up ten thousand a quarter on a wildcat chance and lease every scrap for a thousand miles. But they'll fight to lease it now.

"Look over your shoulder, Sam. Take one long squint at Hardpan. It'll be dark when we get back and by daybreak she'll already begin to look different. Oil scouts will swoop in here like flies. In two days you won't be able to move around without shoving. The Rainbow is a multimillionaire company and Hardpan is back on the map!"

"Son," said Lang. "I don't know as I exactly savvy all this but you're running the company and you ought to know. If the old Rainbow company has started up again I'd sort of like to draw against her for enough to fix up a bit around the Palace and buy some new straw ticks for the beds."

"You shall have 'em, Sam," Arnold promised. "We'll order a dozen truckloads of new straw ticks to-day."

Once again boom days came to Hardpan. Oil speculators mobbed the Palace Hotel and even the cots in the halls were full.

Then the boys began to come back.

Out in California a bent night watchman studied over the news. Automobiles had put the livery business and Bill Wade out of the running at the same time. "I wonder," he said, "I wonder now. Sam was always a stayer."

Two shriveled old prospectors sat up all night over a month-old paper they found in a deserted shack in the Utah hills.

A slender man sat in the directors' room

of a New York bank. Two other dignified gentlemen who entered quietly stared at him in amazement, for the wizard financier was gazing blankly at a paper spread before him, and he was chanting queer, disjointed, half-forgotten phrases: "She spins! Off again on the giddy whirl! The sweet-pea-green shade is the bank's per cent! The house wins and the gamblers lose. I wonder if it's possible," he said; "Sam Lang was always a stayer!"

Corky Clark was still taking the bank's per cent.

Four months to a day from the time Arnold brought in the Hardpan well, a tall man with snow-white hair and mustache crossed the lobby of the Palace Hotel and grasped Lang's hand.

"Jim, I'm glad to see you," said Lang. "I sure am. You've aged some, Jim, but not enough to notice. How soon do you aim to open up the Gilded Eagle? It's been quite a spell since I dropped a chip on twenty in the black."

"Yes, I guess it has, Sam," Riley answered. "Quite a while, and that's a fact. But the old Eagle is out of business, Sam. There's not a State left where you can open up. I tried 'em all. Then I bought a string of trotters. They knocked me off for my roll—the ponies did. That's a hard game to beat. I thought maybe you wouldn't mind if I opened a poker room here in the Palace, Sam. The rake-off from a few tables of stud would soon put me on my feet."

"You go to it, Jim; go right to it if that's what you want to do. You can have any room in the house. Lots of these oil men like to sit in. Business ought to be good."

The following night a dim figure dropped from a freight train and started along the Hardpan curve on foot. Some hours later he entered the Palace.

"Sam, I'm up against it," said Bill Wade. "I'm flat broke. Could you stand me off for a bed?"

"Buck up, Bill, you're not broke," Lang said. "Noways near it. I always knew you sold out too cheap, Bill, and I've sort of protected your interests some. Shouldn't be surprised if I'll owe you a considerable when we find time to settle up. You run along upstairs and play poker with Jim."

A few days after the completion of the railroad a man descended from the night train, and the word spread swiftly that a great New York banker was there to make investments in Hardpan.

He passed the new hotel and walked slowly toward the Palace, glancing frequently at his watch.

"Time's up," he said softly to himself "It's twelve o'clock straight up. If he's alive he'll be there."

At one minute past twelve he crossed the Palace lobby and greeted the man at the desk.

"Hardpan is one good camp, Sam," he said. "I've come back for a few days to look her over."

"Corky, I'm glad to see you back in the old camp again," Lang said. "I sure am. Hardpan always was a good camp. You made a mistake ever to leave it, Corky. A big mistake. I haven't got a bed left in the house, but you can bunk with me. You've got a place to eat and sleep, Corky, for as long as I'm running the Palace."

"Thanks, Sam," and Clark smiled. "I knew you'd put me up."

"There's quite a few of the boys here. Jim is dealing a little stud upstairs," said Lang. "Maybe you'd like to go up and sit in for a while."

"I'll go right up and take out a stack," Clark promptly decided.

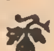
The next evening an oil man with poker inclinations looked in at Jim Riley's room. He glanced around to see which of the three tables would best suit him and swiftly decided that the one where several oldish men were making each other look at their hole cards was the softest table for him.

When he cashed in some hours later, there was a shortage of several hundred dollars in his bank roll. As he closed the door behind him he spoke peevishly to a man in the hall outside.

"I wonder," he said, "what all those old coots will do when Santa Claus dies. Hardpan Lang must be nearly a thousand years old right now." His tones, unintentionally loud, carried distinctly to the room inside.

Corky Clark, financier, grinned cheerfully at the old men around the table.

"It's music to the gambler's ear to hear the suckers roar," he said. "A stranger has come to Hardpan. He don't know much about Sam. Why, Sam won't ever die. Sam Lang's a stayer."





KEEP YOUR HEAD

PERHAPS at no time in our history have we had more need for steady nerves and calm judgment than the present period of transition. The war has left us like a man awakening from a nightmare. We are in that fearful state where the incubus is still heavy upon us, and full return to sanity and sound sense is yet to be grasped.

Sensational theories fly about us daily, and the most terrifying rumors pass from mouth to mouth. Ridiculous deductions and extraordinary contradictions are put before us with all the solemnity of final judgments.

It would seem sometimes as if a malign force were determined to bedevil us with mists and miasmas of thinking. Evils mock at us from commonplace sources. No field appears exempt from this sorcery.

Instances might be multiplied a thousandfold, but we present only a few culled from casual reading and talking. One earnest observer will declare that Europe is hopelessly ruined, and must have our help at the greatest personal sacrifice or else it will perish. Another observer of equal discernment will then make a counter-claim that Europe is far from ruined, and that it will emerge from its predicament without any self-sacrificing financial efforts of ours. Now, up pops a trade expert greeting our tremendous exports with enthusiasm, vowing our business outlook beyond all precedent for prosperity. But against him another expert flings the challenge of too-long foreign credits and high costs to our own people in consequence of the stream of commodities abroad. In the midst of this debate breaks a voice declaring that the cure for war waste and economic distress lies in the six-hour working day with platoons of laborers. That is sheer nonsense, cries another voice, for we must have a fourteen-hour day for workers if we wish to catch up with world-wide arrested production. Then there comes a clamor from many throats that the railroads taken from private control and run coöperatively by the people will be a big blessing to the country. 'Twill be a curse, shout a multitude of tongues in reply. Ah, the next war is brewing already between yellow and white races, assert some wiseacres. What foolishness is this? Counter opposing wiseacres, who swear that the white and yellow races are only beginning to understand one another, and that Japan loves us only less than China, which is counted a great deal. Prohibition is going to reduce crime and all varieties of wickedness, promise the Drys. Just the opposite, contradict the Wets, it will bring a train of new crime, hypocrisy added, and drug-taking to boot. Revolution is upon us, cry some of our deep-thinking calamity howlers. Not revolution but evolution, correct some of our high-thinking forward-lookers.

But amid this storm it is well that the average citizen keeps his head. He does, generally speaking, and our gratitude and admiration go out to him. He knows that the old world has weathered many hurricanes and will weather more, so why should he add to the fury of the present one?

TO FATHERS

ONE after another, out of real need, big universities have been forced to launch drives for funds. To these drives in behalf of education we wish all success. It would seem a fitting time, however, for fathers of prospective students to inquire whether the universities—outside of their purely technical courses—always really do educate. In many subjects, undoubtedly yes; as to others, though, we wonder. As well as another, the subject of history will serve as an instance of what we mean.

How many leave college with a desire to delve further in this field—with a new curiosity, capable of yielding much entertainment and profit, implanted in them? The majority, we fear, can scarcely be said to depart with more than an undigested mass of facts and dates culled from more or less indigestible textbooks—and a longing to forget the whole thing as soon as possible. We wonder if the textbooks are not the trouble. Why not do away with them? Why not substitute for textbooks real books—germane to the subject, of course, but readable for the mere pleasure of the reading?

The idea is not a new one. Law is now taught by the "case" system. Instead of relying on volumes of musty rules and precepts, law schools set students to learning their subject from the study of concrete cases of intrinsic interest in themselves. The subject is made easier by being given the human touch.

It should not be difficult to do this for history. Suppose the period studied to be Europe from 1785 to 1815. From some half dozen or more historical figures of this period let your professor permit each student to select whichever figure most appeals to him as an interesting human being. Students A to J may be intrigued by "the sea-green incorruptible"—Robespierre. Then let your professor recommend, on Robespierre, a list of books that are literature and readable without undue pain by even a student. And let it be on Robespierre that students A to J are finally examined, not on the events of 1785 to 1815 as a whole. Others might pick Wellington, Danton, or another, for their money. With them the procedure would be the same. As background for this reading, sufficient to give the student some comprehension of the scene wherein the man he read of moved and had his being, it should be simple enough for your professor, in his earlier lectures, to give as adequate a synopsis of the events of the whole period as was necessary.

We cheerfully concede that, under this system, our student would emerge with but a scanty knowledge of the field as a whole. Which is precisely what would not worry us in the least—if only he emerged with interest aroused in the man he had "read up on." Let him once get the idea that Danton, for instance, was a worth-while character, is he not more or less likely some time to want to know more about the general environment in which Danton's tragic part was played? To a greater degree than if trained under the textbook system, would he not be fairly liable, some winter's night in after life, to browse into some book on that stupendous French Revolution, just because it *entertained* him to do so?

To how many college courses some such reformation as to method of teaching could profitably be applied is something it might repay such of our readers as are fathers to consider.

HISTORY BECOMING POPULAR

IN our public schools a good proportion of the pupils have hitherto, as a rule, been more or less weak on the subject of modern history. Some of them gleaned what they knew in a haphazard way and soon forgot most of what they had learned on this subject when they left school. Even among those who afterward went through a collegiate course were also some who did not learn a great deal about the history of the different countries in the world that remained long in their memories.

Recently, however, at the public libraries in different cities of the United States there has been a sudden increase in the number of readers who take an interest in historical events. Many of them had only a general and rather hazy idea of the history and characteristics of the countries taking part in the war. All the books recently written on the subject which are in the libraries are eagerly read now, whether in the form of novels or in succinct description or historical sketches.

At public libraries there is not only a sudden and increasing demand among the readers for books treating on the history of the United States before the war, but also for books describing the progress of the war, the economic and other conditions, and the general history of the other countries taking part in it, and many details which previously had little interest for the majority of the readers.

A PAN-AMERICAN RAILROAD

WHAT the British have done in railroad construction in Africa, and are planning to do in Asia, the United States should do in the Western Hemisphere, says an observer of conditions in Spanish-American countries. The importance of the Canal Zone, he thinks, is little more than half realized by the connection of the Atlantic with the Pacific by water. The completion of the gaps necessary to connect up all of North America with all of Central and South America by rail would open up tremendous possibilities in the commercial world.

These gaps now consist of about three hundred miles, and begin south of Mexico, in Guatemala, or another gap from San Salvador could be filled, and connection could thus be made with Colon or Panama, where American railroads are now operating. From the Zone extensions could and should be made in Colombia, to or near Bogota, and thence eastward to a connection with the Argentine Railroad at La Paz in Bolivia; also, at a point southeast of Bogota, the tracks could be extended southeastward by way of Manaos, Brazil, in the great American rubber region, to join with the Brazilian railroads to Rio de Janeiro. Ultimately the rails should be extended down the Pacific coast side to Valparaiso and still on southward toward the Strait of Magellan, all that is needed to make an unbroken line of railroad being the construction of some hundreds of miles of connecting lines to fill in the gaps now existing.

A glance at a large-scale map of North and South America will show that the proposed routes will connect with every principal city and completed railroad line in the United States, Mexico, the Central American countries, and South America. By water routes, the European countries can now compete on almost even terms with American commercial houses for the trade of Spanish America, but with the proposed land route in operation, we could dominate the markets of all the Western Hemisphere south of the Canadian line.

Of course, displomacy as well as rail lines would be necessary, and a knowledge of the Spanish language and, more important, of the Latin-American temperament, will help the American business man even more than strategic railway operations. But the understanding that would result from the mere contact with these temperamental people in the promotion and building of the railway gaps would go a long way toward paving the road to still better understandings. American banks already exist in a number of South American cities—the large cities which front on the Atlantic. The railway connections now suggested would afford a quick entry through the back door of Latin America, and European powers would have no access to this door. But more important than any material door is the subtle, the intangible gateway to the confidence and friendship of that peculiar person, differing from country to country, the Latin American.

CANDY VERSUS BEER

IT has long been known that a good proportion of the men who never drank beer or any other intoxicating liquor liked to eat candy. We knew one or two cases of men who were employed at indoor work in an executive capacity and never used intoxicating liquor, who kept a package of candy at hand while at work. Just as men who drank liquor might slip out to a near-by barroom for a cocktail or a glass of beer to "steady their nerves," they would at intervals stop to eat a piece of candy, which acted upon them apparently as a mild stimulant. To a man accustomed to even a moderate use of intoxicants, rest for the nerves would not likely be suggested from the munching of candy, but his palate might have been dulled a little by the use of stronger stimulants.

The owners of breweries in different parts of the United States seem to be alive to the

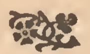
significance of these facts. One big brewery plant, in Rochester, New York, has been transformed into a large wholesale candy factory. Another, in Massachusetts, has become a chocolate factory, and some of the oldest and largest breweries in the United States are now making a sweet syrup, forming a basis for candies and confections. Many inquiries have been received by brewers' associations from candy and ice-cream manufacturers who desire to purchase their properties, and some manufacturers of saloon bar fittings have begun installing new and luxurious fittings for candy stores. The sale of candy is increasing fast, and it is believed that many persons who had been previously moderate drinkers are becoming candy and ice-cream eaters.

AN ORGY OF SPENDING ABROAD

ONLY those who revel in scenes of melancholy, or take ghoulish glee in feasting upon spectacles showing the decay of human nature, can find much pleasure in traveling in Europe this year. The foreign capitals are said to be gayer than ever, and there is an orgy of luxury in London and Paris, in Rome, and even in Berlin, where rising prices and the depreciation of standards of value seem only to encourage certain classes to renewed pleasure-seeking. No recent statistics of suicides have been forthcoming from these capitals, but it seems inevitable that self-destruction must be on the increase where the gulf between pleasure and pauperism is so narrow.

Only in Vienna among the great capitals—in Vienna, where cold and starvation have caused so many deaths that no count can be kept of the funerals—is there a lack of gayety and luxury. After the Napoleonic wars there was also an epidemic of extravagance and dancing among peoples who could ill afford even the necessities of life. Upward of three million people were killed in the Napoleonic wars, which stretched over a period of eighteen years. More than seven million were killed in the recent war within four years, and the crippled and diseased amount to more than twice as many more. Yet "On with the dance, let joy be unconfined," seems to be the motto now, and it is like dancing above a charnel house.

Of all foreign capitals, Paris has ever been more attractive to Americans than any other. Therefore, Americans who are planning a sojourn in the French capital should want to know how much more it will cost to live there than it did before the war. Those who go abroad should be prepared to take along much more of the lucre of their land than formerly; also, for even though foreign exchange has depreciated to such an extent, the rise in prices has much more than made up for the difference. A few items will suffice. A suit of clothes that in 1914 cost twenty-five francs now sells for four hundred and fifty francs. Coffee has trebled in price, ham costs six times what it did, bread three times, and butter about seven times. And Americans are sure to be charged many times the prices they once paid for drinks—for as soon as their nationality is known the European bar keepers will know that their desires can be preyed upon to the limit.



POPULAR TOPICS

LABOR being one of the outstanding questions of the day, it is interesting to come across this opinion of B. C. Forbes, one of our leading financial writers:

"I have a theory regarding wages; it may or may not prove sound. I believe that the unskilled laborer in future will receive substantially higher wages than in pre-war days, but that the difference between him and the average run of skilled workers will be less than formerly. The pay of the able-bodied laborer doing hard work is, to my way of thinking, far more likely to remain at or near the war-time level than is the pay of the artisan, the man who has learned some sort of trade. The war has cut down our normal inflow of immigration by two million to three million workers, nearly all unskilled, whereas a very large number of men who formerly were classed as unskilled have now learned to fill jobs calling for so-called skilled labor. So have women. In other words, the supply of skilled workers has increased, while the supply of unskilled workers has diminished."

HERE are a few illuminating facts: From 1815 to 1855, the average home used sperm oil and candles to the amount of twenty-five candle hours a night, or nine thousand a year, at a cost of $22. From 1855 to 1865, the introduction of kerosene gave fifty per cent more light at the same cost of $22 per annum. From 1865 to 1875, kerosene was supplemented with gas, the average family used 20,000 to 38,000 candle hours a year, at a cost ranging $23—$34. From 1875 to 1885, kerosene and gas reduced in price, the average family using 76,000 candle hours annually at a cost of $30. From 1885 to 1905, kerosene disappearing as an illuminant, electricity and gas mantles giving us 200,000 candle hours at an annual cost of $20. From 1905 to 1915, the average family uses 200,000 gas candle hours and 123,000 electric candle hours at an approximate cost of $15.

WHO are the real capitalists? We hear a lot against them in radical fulminations. But, as a matter of fact, we, the people of the United States, are the most powerful of capitalists. If a majority of the bank depositors in this country conspired to draw their accounts to the limit, it would mean financial panic on a scale hitherto unknown. Statistics prove that not more than five per cent of employers are capitalists, that is, that ninety-five per cent of employers handle other people's capital and work with other people's money. Therefore, if you have one dollar in a savings bank, you are a capitalist, for your money is loaned by the bank to business men for their enterprises.

IN spite of all our bad habits, it has been found by Doctor Dudley A. Sargent, the physical-training expert, that American girls have increased an inch in height and gained, on the average, ten pounds in weight in the last quarter of a century, while the men have increased their stature by two inches and their weight by nine pounds in the same period. So when we hear the cry of the growth of general iniquity and degeneration let us match it with these offsetting figures.

WHILE on the subject of physical welfare, let us make note of the fact that report has been made of the complete cure of leprosy cases. Some of those inflicted with this dread disease have been treated with a formula composed of Chaulmoogra oil, camphorated oil, and resorcin. News of the cures has come from both Hawaii and the Philippines.

NOT long ago in this department we spoke of the scarcity of camphor, how the bulk of it came from Formosa, and we suggested that agricultural experts urge other countries to take up the culture of the camphor tree. C. E. Walter, of Pascagoula, Mississippi, writes us the following interesting note apropos of this: "There are a great many camphor trees growing along the Gulf Coast as ornamental and shade trees. They could be grown commercially in any quantity. They are as easily grown as cotton, and it is not necessary for the trees to mature before camphor can be produced from them. Any time after one year of age the leaves and twigs can be used for distilling, and camphor can be made as easily as moonshine whisky, and a crop can be produced every year."

BUT what strikes us with greater amazement than either the billions in gold and diamonds is a recent bit of information about the production of shoes by one of the largest shoemaking factories. It was estimated that their output was about seventy thousand pairs of shoes a day, and they hope to produce a hundred thousand pairs a day before very long. At this rate we are almost ready to believe that there would soon be enough shoes for every human being on earth.

Make or Break

By John Fleming Wilson

Author of "The Mystery of Marbury Passage," Etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

Robert Edwards, San Francisco shipowner, objects to his son Tom's wishing to marry Alicia Stillings, and decides to break him to his will. As a first step he discharges Tom from his employ. Richard Hawley, an unsuccessful shipping man, needs a ship to get freight from Vladivostok. Edwards will give him the almost condemned *Dark Star,* if he will agree to offer Tom a job as captain of his schooner, the *Fly-By-Night,* and make things so hard for him that Tom will come back glad to do as his father says. Hawley promises to offer the job, on condition that Edwards will let it be a case of make or break his son absolutely. Edwards accepts the condition. Also, Hawley gets Edwards to agree to accept any captain at all that can be found for the *Dark Star.* At the last minute Hawley offers Tom the captaincy of either the *Fly-By-Night* or the *Dark Star,* telling him that the *Dark Star* is likely to go to the bottom long before reaching Vladivostok. Tom accepts the *Dark Star* in order to prove that he can do what no one else dares, and make a reputation.

(A Three-Part Story—Part II)

CHAPTER VI.

THE *Dark Star* was to sail early on the morning of the eigbtb of September. On the evening of the seventh Richard Hawley came down to the wharf and went on board. He saw that the hatches were already battened down, the cargo booms stowed in their crutches, and tbe decks cleared. A glance at the stumpy funnel top sbowed him steam was getting up; a wisp of vapor floated from the steam pipe against a flawless dark sky. His eyes traveled on to the truck of the slim foretopmast. There the blue peter stood out in the night wind. He nodded to himself and proceeded to the captain's cabin. To his knock Edwards himself opened briskly.

"I thought maybe you'd spend the last evening ashore," the elder man remarked uncomfortably. "I didn't really expect to find you."

"Mr. Greening went ashore," Edwards replied with a smile. "I thought he might as well go. He's been rather worried tbe past week."

"And you?"

The captain pointed to an easy-chair, under the bright globes of the lamp. His visitor seated himself and looked round. Everywhere highly polished furniture and gleaming brasswork met the eye. The narrow planks of the deck underfoot were white. They bad been newly painted with fresh black paint. Tbe bertb showing through the neatly drawn curtains was spotless. An open wardrobe door showed clothes trimly hung. The desk was clear except for a single document spread out with thumb tacks.

"You evidently have a first-rate steward—or keep a good eye on him," Mr. Hawley remarked pleasantly.

Edwards threw himself on the lounge and laugbed. "I've given you a hard name as an owner, sir. You'll have to take a look-see in the saloon, or the steward will think I've lied to bim. Find some fault, for my sake."

"Presently." Hawley seemed thoughtful. "In fact, I'm specially pleased that you've smartened the old packet up this way," he went on. "It makes a good impression all around. We can't be too particular in little things. Exactly." He stopped dead and threw a pleading glance at the young skipper. Edwards caught it and sat up promptly.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"Has sbe—does she lurch any more, Tom?"

"Not a wiggle."

"And she's all right otherwise?"

Edwards laughed. "We've loaded her till she's balanced by ounces. At the last we stowed a couple of hundred tons on the afterdeck. That was the mate's idea. As he remarked, if it made her crank we could get

it below hatches any old time. But it'll put her by the head. He tried her out by filling one of the boats with water, and when he figured her stability he asked me for a last night ashore. Not that he seemed much worried."

"I hope you will have a successful voyage," Hawley sighed. Then he smiled faintly. "I find myself as nervous over this business as a youngster over his first canoeing trip. And I'm a pretty old old-timer."

"The *Dark Star* is a frightful gamble, Dick," Edwards said, with a sudden return to their familiarity. "Awful! She may have been a decent ship when she was built. If she was, somebody who didn't know his business mishandled her terribly. You know I'm not so wise about ships as I ought to be. Of course, I've stood watches on various packets and done the usual stuff for a ticket. But schooners are my line. If this were a schooner I'd say she'd been misloaded, overmasted, too sharply stayed, and driven too hard. In this case the only thing one can suggest is misloading. Some people do, you know."

"I know," Hawley returned. "But the steamer herself doesn't worry me so much as something else."

Edwards fell serious at sight of his face. "And that?"

"It's a long drag for a nine-knot vessel across to Psugar Straits. You have wireless, to be sure. But I can find no steamers making that route this month except a couple belonging to the Inter-ocean. It goes without saying that both these ships have orders to pay no attention to you, unless it's a case of salvage. The whole matter will be in your hands, of course. You will do what you think best. But I doubt whether you would be any too pleased to sign yourself and your vessel over to your father. He would make the most of the fact that he had had to bring his own rebellious son into port when that willful young man had thought he could do better alone."

"By gad, you're right!" Tom boomed. It was the first time Hawley had ever heard such a note from him. It was really tremendous, he thought. What a voice!

"I only mentioned the matter because I thought you ought to understand that I shouldn't blame you, in case an accident happened," Hawley went on. "You must be convinced that I shall trust your judgment. I shan't complain."

Edwards glared at him. "Just note one little thing down in your diary," he retorted. "Either the *Dark Star* arrives under her own steam or she doesn't arrive at all. Gimme twenty-one days to make Hakodate in. Don't worry till I'm sixty days out. Don't give the ship up till I'm six months overdue. Keep a job open for me a year. Don't tell Alicia I failed till two years are by. And then wait five years before you're sure of never again seeing the old *Dark Star* steaming up the channel from the Golden Gate."

Hawley concealed his gratification under a deprecatory cough. "One never can tell—act of God, you know—stress of weather—the best of ships miss port sometimes."

"Miss it we may," Edwards responded. "But we'll not be dragged in at the end of a hawser. Just set that down in your diary."

Mr. Hawley leaned forward. His aquiline visage was lit by some fresher fire than had burned in his thin heart these many years.

"I went to sea the same as you—thirty years gone," he told the young skipper. "I had the education you have, the family wealth withheld from me, my own way to make. I can see that old hooker still—the three-masted ship *Falls of Trent*, an old clipper. She had been a lucky ship. I made good with her. I came back voyage after voyage with my log book written up smoothly and nothing but congratulations from all concerned. Then there came a time when I had the offer of a steamship—a bad hat. I counted my earnings and turned my back on the main chance—the chance to put to the proof all the luck I'd had. That was where I turned aside from the highway to success. I thought I was able to make my way, easily, ashore. I was going to be the gentleman. I wasn't minded to take an old tramp and make her pay by blood and tears and show I was the man for any job. I cashed in my chips and got out of the game, the man's game of running ships on any ocean in any weather and bringing home the freights. Freight, as our old books say, is the mother of wages. I quit."

Edwards glanced at Hawley curiously. Something feverish and malign had crept into this old man's blood. He was staring with too-bright eyes; his fingers worked on his knee; his voice was thready with pain. Was this the suave, debonair, easy-going, always agreeable Dick Hawley whom he had known so long? What was it that had wiped

his lips clean of moderate words and smooth intonations and worldly, kindly amenities?

"Yes, sir?" he murmured.

"I quit," Hawley croaked. "I had thirty thousand dollars in bank and pleasant words from every man along the water front. I was Richard Hawley, the lucky captain of a lucky ship. I brought the freight home. But when I saw the rusty topsides and the battered stem and the creaking engines of an unlucky steamer which men came and asked me to run for them, I quit. I went ashore as gayly as any lad ever whipped off on a holiday. I turned my back on the job. I was no man for their money."

Such confidences always embarrass young men. It is an understanding in their social life that all men succeed. Failure is unthinkable. There is always time to make the killing. And here was a man, apparently successful, who deplored his failure, who excitedly poured out the narrative of his decline from success. Edwards sought some kindly means to stop his confession.

"Every fellow has to choose for himself," he faltered.

"Exactly! I chose. I picked the easiest way. I jingled thirty thousand dollars in my pocket and told them to go hang with their rotten old packet. I was going to play the owner myself and send others to sea."

"Sure," the other remarked.

"Two years later a man came along who'd never run a ship nor loaded one nor seen a gale of wind at sea nor fought off a lee shore nor stared into a fog nor listened with all his ears for the clang of a bell buoy out of the thick. But he'd never balked at a task. Inside of three years he had my ships away from me, my freight riding in his own bottoms, my money in his bank. He knew me. He knew perfectly well that I'd drawn back in a pinch. He had my nerve figured to an hour. He had marked the minute when I would quit."

"Yes?"

"It was your father—Robert Edwards," Hawley cackled, trying to smile. "Yes, he broke me—smashed me—ruined me."

Edwards looked away. He was shocked and dismayed. Life was horrible.

"When he smashed me and took my ships away he took away everything else worth while," the old man went on, more quietly. "Everything but one—a few old friends who never knew or cared whether I was a success or not. But apart from them I have nothing. Nothing!"

Comprehension lit Tom Edwards' eyes. He saw himself in Hawley's place. "Ah," he thought with a pang, "he lost the woman he loved!" But what he said was, "You still have the *Dark Star*."

Hawley nodded absently. His thoughts were on some far-away object. His fever subsided. He grew still. He sighed.

"The *Dark Star* will retrieve all our fortunes, sir," Edwards murmured.

The other rose. "I have really little to lose," he answered. "But you have everything. I missed my chance. I want you to have yours. Make or break!"

"Make or break, sir!" Edwards returned heartily. "No salvage! The *Dark Star* arrives with her freight money due the owner. Funny chaps, those old-timers, with their careful writing it all down for us that unless freights are earned no wages are due. But they're right. I'll remember that. *Freight is the mother of wages*. Correct. When I have a house flag of my own I'll put that on it."

"Now, to look over your ship, captain," Hawley said gravely.

The inspection took long. Edwards detected an unusual earnestness in his employer's method of assuring himself that the steamer was well found and seaworthy. He perceived that Hawley's eyes were skilled and alert. At last they arrived in the engine room. Chief Engineer Malcolmson was dozing on a bench under the tool board. He received them with many dolorous grunts.

"The rheumatism is getting me," he complained. "I oughtn't to be going to sea at my time of life. With such engines."

"Everything all right?" Hawley demanded.

Malcolmson cast a wary eye on Edwards. "So-so," he remarked. "The boilers are filthy. But she'll go." He snapped his lips together. "I'll make her go," he said with sudden peevishness. "Drat it, I never saw the machinery I couldn't make run." He threw a look of scorn at the silent engines. "I'll make *these* go. So long as the captain here keeps the old packet right side up—or nearly so."

"In that case I think I have no more business here," Mr. Hawley murmured, and led the way out and up the long, shadowy ladders to the upper deck.

"Malcolmson," he remarked to his com-

panion, "has a good reputation. He has always been successful and well liked. I'm glad you have him with you."

"Glad he knows his business," Edwards answered curtly.

"I hope you find Mr. Greening an excellent officer, also. You sail at nine in the morning? I'll be here at half past eight. Good night."

Mr. Greening came in presently, looking more inappropriate than ever. His smooth, bland face was almost unctuous in its complacency. He exhaled the smoke of a cigar leisurely and glanced at the chart with a careless eye.

"Nine in the morning, sir? I'll have to rustle up a couple more hands before sailing. Lots of time, however."

Edwards looked thoughtfully at his lieutenant. "What kind of a crew have we?" he asked.

The chief mate examined his pink nails. "Not much to look at," he answered. "I rather fancy we have a tough lot of *marineros* aboard. The four quartermasters impress me as being deep-dyed villains—probably murderers. The winchmen are undoubtedly hooking it because the law is after them. But I'll stake my life on the lamp trimmer."

"Keep them up to the scratch, Mr. Greening," Edwards said with rather more formality than the occasion seemed to require.

The mate looked down at his neat, shining boots and brushed a fleck of dust from a trousers leg. "Trust me for that," he said cheerfully. "I don't exactly like to carry a hard name, but I allow that I keep my crews and my ship smart. Yes, sir."

"What kind of wireless operator have we?"

"Youth is his principal charm, sir."

Edwards felt a sudden sinking at his heart. The taking of the *Dark Star* across the Pacific was to be no child's play. And the man he would have to rely on chiefly was effeminate, careless, probably incompetent. A sudden thought stung him. He recalled several things that Hawley had insinuated, the veiled warnings he had given.

"Ever sail for the Inter-ocean line, Mr. Greening?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, indeed. In fact, your father recommended me to Mr. Hawley. Very nice of your father, I must say."

With this he bestirred himself into action and departed. Edwards stared after him.

CHAPTER VII.

The next morning Tom Edwards looked with much anxiety for the arrival of his employer. He expected Alicia with him, for she had promised to come down and bid him farewell. But at eight o'clock a messenger brought the last needful paper and at half past the pilot turned up, bustling and skeptical, as usual, of all the mate's preparations.

Edwards summoned his chief officer who appeared shortly, looking as though he had no care in the world.

"The pilot wishes a word with you, Mr. Greening," Tom remarked.

To his astonishment that functionary, after a single glance at Greening, assumed an air of subdued mystery. He professed himself absolutely satisfied with all possible preparations. The mate vanished to his duties and the pilot stared at Edwards with some curiosity.

"You're the son of the Edwards of the Inter-ocean, aren't you, captain?" he finally inquired.

"Yes," Tom answered, puzzled by the man's brusque question, still more so by the unprofessional manner of it.

"Humph!" the pilot grunted noncommittally and went to the bridge. When Edwards joined him after a little, much disappointed at not seeing Hawley and Alicia, the pilot made a final remark, in a speculative tone: "I'll see to it that you get a fair offing, captain. I wonder how much westing the *Dark Star* will manage?"

This saying was at once so meaningless and so suggestive of insult that Edwards would have responded hotly had not the wireless operator come up and handed him a message.

He made his way down the deserted deck directly to the wireless station, situated at the after end of the raised quarter-deck and abaft the hand-wheel house. He entered quickly and Alicia faced him. He was shocked at the pallor of her face and the pain in her eyes.

"In Heaven's name!" he stammered. "What's the matter? Where's Dick Hawley? Are you here alone?"

She looked him full in the eyes. "Dick is ill, terribly ill. He sent me word and I saw him. Then I came down here and wrote that message the wireless man gave you. The *Dark Star* mustn't sail—not under any circumstances."

"Hawley is crazy!" he said, mumbling the words in his utter bewilderment. "Of course the steamer will sail. The pilot's on the bridge now. We sail in fifteen minutes."

Alicia's eyes never wavered on his. "No," she said with great finality. "Dick would have come and stopped your going, if it had been possible. But he's too sick. I think," she added with perfect simplicity of sorrow, "that he will die."

"But what does it mean?" Edwards demanded, his tone changing unconsciously as he began to grasp the fact that a disaster had occurred.

"Dick specially begged me not to tell you anything more—you are just to stop the steamer from going. You *can't* go!"

Tom paused and his mind swiftly ran over all that had happened in the past eight days. Nothing could be interpreted as a possible explanation of such an order. But that there was peril in the air he knew. Now that his employer was sick and unable to attend to affairs the burden rested on himself. He motioned Alicia to a seat and locked the door behind him with a turn of his wrist.

"Tell me the truth," he commanded. His voice was repressed, muffled; and still its volume and power shook the little cabin.

"See Dick," she pleaded.

"I'll not see Dick," he returned. "I'm going to set you ashore and get my ship to sea inside of twenty minutes. If you don't care to tell me what's happened, I'll go anyway. Alicia, don't you understand that if Hawley is ill, down and out, the sooner I get this voyage over and his freight money and his vessel back to him the better for all? Put that down in your diary: 'Tom Edwards sailed on time this day.'"

She seemed at a loss and stood quietly thinking. When she turned her eyes on his again Edwards saw that she was trying not to cry.

"I never knew anything about business," she whispered. "Till now. But Dick found out something last night—by accident—which changes everything. I can see it does. I agreed with Dick we couldn't—mustn't let you go. It's sure death—or worse than death."

"There are things worse than death," Tom assented dryly.

"Worse," she repeated. "If you go, Dick Hawley and you go to prison. Maybe you will be hanged."

"Men aren't hanged for taking their ships to sea," he said soothingly.

"They are hanged for never getting them to port," she replied in a whisper.

He came a step nearer to her. It marked the enormous change in their relation that Alicia did not draw back a step.

"For never getting them into port," she repeated. "It is all arranged, Tom. When you sail to-day you take your ship out never to bring her back."

His face whitened and he answered savagely: "That is a lie."

"It's not," she flung back at him. "Dick knows. He told me. It's all arranged. The *Dark Star* is never going to arrive. She will be lost. And when you come back you will be arrested and put into prison for destroying her and losing lives and trying to collect insurance."

Edwards threw back his head and laughed softly. "By thunder, that's some story, Alicia! Some yarn! Who's going to tell it?"

"Your father."

The tension in the little cabin with its paraphernalia significant of controlled, hidden forces, became unbearable to them both. Alicia was the first to assert herself.

"You see," she murmured, with some curtness, "you have no choice."

"No choice?" he repeated resonantly. "That's what the people who hate you want to take away from you—the freedom to choose. I know father is a hard man, unscrupulous and determined. I suppose I ought to resent what you say. But I feel that it is true. I'll sail just the same."

Underneath them the deck quivered suddenly and a dull rumble sounded. The engineers were turning the engines over, warming up the machines for the long voyage. Then another sound, a swift clacking of gear trains broke in on this. The pilot on the bridge was testing the steam-steering apparatus.

"You see?" Edwards went on. "All's ready. Tell Dick I didn't know the particulars, but I sailed just the same. You see, Alicia, they can beat us on shore, Dick and me. But tell Dick I'm taking the battle out to sea where the odds are just and one man stands even with another. Tell him I'll bring his ship back, with the freight money earned."

She glowed at his tone. For a moment she and he looked at the future with the same

eyes and beheld the same vision. But recollection of the imperative present recalled her.

"Dick found this out yesterday, he told me. He got wind of a plot to discredit both of you in the afternoon. It had something to do with the loading of the steamer. Then he saw you. Later a man he had done favors to came to his rooms and told him the Inter-ocean had proof that the *Dark Star* was never meant to reach port. The man gave details, which Dick couldn't tell me. But when you get out of reach of help your ship will sink."

"What's really the matter with Dick?" he demanded.

Alicia's lips opened but words did not come. She colored painfully.

"What's the matter with him?" he insisted, in a manner that would have no denial.

"He tried to—he was so discouraged—he felt so terribly about it all——" she faltered. "He shot himself."

"Ah!"

"He may die," she went on. "I was to come down here with him, you know. I called at his apartments with my maid and found him. He seemed to care for nothing but to have you warned not to sail. I did everything needful—doctor, nurse, and other help. Then I came down here."

"That leaves the whole affair in my hands," Edwards returned with sudden fire. "I'll sail."

"But what shall *I* do?" she pleaded, suddenly unbarring the gates of her lifelong reserve.

His eyes steadied her, with their message of hope and endurance and fortitude. "I'll be back, Alicia. Meanwhile keep Dick's spirits up. For Heaven's sake don't either of you worry! No use to say any more. I'm not in a position to talk much."

"Dick said something else, Tom: you might be wrecked through nobody's fault at all. They will accuse you just the same."

"I understand," he responded cheerfully. "Poor old Dick! Too old for this kind of a fight! Tell him I shan't lose. Tell him I'll never come back to tell a story of wreck and disaster. Tell him the only way I'll come back is on the bridge of the *Dark Star*. Make or break. That's the word, Alicia. No matter how many weeks pass, or months, without word from us, don't give us up."

She let her voice linger on her answer, sounding the words in unmuted tones: "I can do that, Tom. I can always wait. Ever so long! But please—come back home."

Like two embarrassed children they reached out their hands and clasped them a moment. Then Tom unlocked the door and stepped out backward. Alicia followed, and they walked to the rail. The gangplank was still there, but men waited for an order to draw it ashore. She went down it without a backward glance and to the wharf. There she turned for an instant, and Edwards caught her mild, girlish look. He took off his cap gravely. She vanished.

"All right, Mr. Ticknor," he said to the newly joined second mate, "get your lines clear to cast off."

On the bridge he took his stand by the pilot. Below him, on the forecastle head, he saw the smug face of Mr. Greening, upturned in bland expectancy of the orders to come.

"Let's go," Edwards remarked to the pilot.

The *Dark Star* pulled herself reluctantly from her berth and fussily straightened out for the channel seaward. Edwards quietly observed his ship's behavior under various conditions, but made no remark. When Alcatraz was astern he busied himself on some compass corrections and, when they reached the bar, dismissed the pilot without a word. When the northeast Farallon was abeam the course was set, Mr. Greening came up to report, the steward appeared with his day's *chits,* and Mr. Malcolmson duly handed in his engine-room log. The voyage was begun.

It was one of those fine noons which make the California coast beautiful in the fall. The wind had fallen to a light westerly breeze which caught the crests of the long rollers and dappled them with light. A few far, fleecy clouds rode in the azure north. If the *Dark Star* was crank or unseaworthy or a steamer of bad habits, there would be ample time to reckon on her disabilities before foul days tested her and her complement. But under the strain of the events of the morning he knew that it was not wholly the ship he must watch. Among the crew was at least one man who had sworn she was never to arrive. He was sure he knew that man. He must keep an eye on him, study him, find out how he worked at his design and balk him at the last.

"Mr. Greening," he remarked casually, "I figure on reaching Hakodate in twenty days. As she is trimmed now, the steamer makes nine knots easily. Better than I hoped."

The chief mate glanced fastidiously at the ancient chart pinned on his commander's desk, pulled a silver-mounted pencil from his pocket, and touched a point on the great circle that marked the *Dark Star's* destined course. Edwards noticed that the mate's fingers trembled slightly. The lead traced an almost imperceptible maze of crooked lines just south of one of the Aleutian Islands, while he spoke with apparent ease:

"My experience has been that it's pretty thick up around there," he remarked. "Dead reckonings are untrustworthy, don't you think? How about making that point there? It would give us a fresh departure and allow checking of our figures."

Edwards leaned over and nodded. But his mind was not on the problem of picking up that distant point; it was trying to fit this suggestion of Greening's into the scheme of things. He kept his head bent over the chart.

"All right," he said finally. "It will do no harm, though I don't like to cross the Japan Current there. It will set us back a day."

"And save us five, maybe," the mate remarked.

Edwards glanced up and dismissed him civilly. Then he seated himself behind his locked door and studied his plight as he had never studied any problem in his life.

When he came to reckon up his father's part in the plot which he could not doubt had been formed against himself, Hawley, and the ship, he found himself in strange difficulties. Nothing is harder than to calculate how wickedly a man you have respected and loved will act when it is to his selfish interest to crush you. That Robert Edwards was entirely capable of doing a treacherous and infamous thing, his son did not question. His brief, desultory experience in the Inter-ocean had taught him a good deal; he had learned to distrust its active directors. Not that they had ever openly advocated violence against firms that opposed them, but they had always seemed to carry the threat of it, like a concealed weapon they wouldn't hesitate to use at a pinch. How far would Robert Edwards go to punish a rebellious son? Tom knew that his father had ruthlessly and calmly cut him off without a penny and tossed him aside under guise of putting him on his mettle. The reason for that was Alicia. He also knew that once upon a time Robert had smashed Dick Hawley. It was absolutely certain that the head of the Inter-ocean knew that the three had become banded together against him; Hawley and his son actively, with the girl being drawn in with them unconsciously but surely. How far would Robert Edwards go to crush his son, his former enemy, and the woman who threatened his domination?

"He'll go the limit," Tom told himself. "And there will be some rough work going, too. But trust father to do the smooth politics in the dark in his own shop. He's planned it all out, like an old fox. The rough work comes at sea, where nobody talks—or lives to talk."

He then proceeded to work out the scheme in detail which the scanty facts he had in hand seemed to point to. He saw that it was twofold: first, to assure the loss of the *Dark Star* during her voyage; second, to impeach himself and Hawley, when he came back to report the wreck, of planning to bilk the underwriters and the public by willfully casting the steamship away and then pleading act of God—a natural and plausible plea in view of the *Dark Star's* sinister history.

"By thunder, that's smooth!" he told himself, almost jubilantly. "Hawley laid himself open to the thing like the good-natured ass he is. He seized on a rotten old packet, chartered her, loaded her, picked me as skipper, and sent her to sea in spite of all warnings. Even if the *Dark Star* should turn turtle some fine night, nobody would believe it an accident if the Inter-ocean line charges us with barratry. Now one thing is sure: father is banking on my losing the steamer within the next two weeks. He's laid his plans well, or Dick Hawley wouldn't have simply given up the way he did. How is the affair going to be managed? And who is father's agent?"

Supposing Greening to be the man, whom had he as accomplices? Edwards instantly put the chief engineer out of the question. Mr. Malcolmson was a good man, with a clean record, incapable of such wickedness. The quartermasters, any of them, might be in Greening's confidence. The two mates, Ticknor and Haverhill, were young fellows with ambitions. They might, or might not be seduced by the chief officer.

"I reckon I've got to figure on whom I can trust myself, not on who is in Greening's pay," the young man told himself. With gratitude he remembered that among his immediate subordinates was one whose face

was sufficient guaranty of trustworthiness, a true seaman, experienced, skillful, tried by many years of arduous exertion.

"The bos'n is my man," he said, cheering up. "Padger is the boy to stick by the ship and me."

That evening at supper Mr. Malcolmson ate in silence and left early. Edwards and Greening remained at table for some time, the mate because he was naturally a lover of food, the captain for the reason that he had set himself to learn more of this mysterious subordinate. They talked of a good many things, but found nothing that elicited more than commonplaces. At last Edwards got up and said: "I have a notion I can sleep to-night."

The mate picked his white, even teeth and remarked that such weather was made for sailormen. "Which goes to show that our chief engineer isn't one," he concluded. "Did you see his sour face? Ugh!"

Tom left the saloon and went to the bridge. Mr. Ticknor was on watch and reported nothing out of the ordinary, except a message from the engine room that the machines had been slowed two turns.

"That takes a knot off our speed," Edwards answered, and presently went below. Here he waited till he heard the mate's door slam shut. Then he sought the engine room. Mr. Malcolmson was on the working platform, alone. His scanty gray hair was uncovered, his face was grimy, his eyes blurred with weariness.

"Why two turns less, chief?"

"She won't stand it, sir."

"That drops our speed to eight knots, chief—and lengthens the voyage two days."

Malcolmson wiped his forehead with his sleeve and shook his head. "I thought she'd stand nine. Eight is her gait. And if she makes heavy weather of it I shan't venture on that. I've had my troubles already."

Edwards listened to the steady tramp of the machines for a while. His ear could detect nothing but smooth strength and perfectly coördinated motion. He glanced at the chief. He was staring up with a puzzled expression.

"What's the matter, chief?"

The engineer continued to peer into the upper structure. Tom raised his eyes, too, and watched. Presently he detected an irregular, nodding motion, a kind of nudging by the great low-pressure cylinder of its high-pressure brother.

"D'ye see that, sir?" whispered Malcolmson.

"Yes, but what is it? Nothing wrong, is there?"

"A mere eccentricity, sir," was the dry response. "Due, one might say, to a structural weakness."

"Does it hurt anything?"

"Nothing, except my feelings," the chief replied. "But in case there's need of a full head of steam, I'm not saying it might not develop and mess up the engine room a little. I've known a low-press' to cook a whole watch alive in my time, when it fetched adrift."

"Is that the reason for your slowing her down?" Tom insisted.

"It is," was the reply, "one reason for that. Though I didn't know of it when I did slow her a couple of turns."

For several days the *Dark Star* steadily steamed on her course to the northward, now and again passing some wallowing cannery man, or tramp plunging in ballast to the Sound to load wheat. The weather was getting sharper, the wind fresher, the sea making slowly but unmistakably. To Edwards' satisfaction his steamer maintained her speed, though her bows were beginning to dip deeply and once in a while she drove them under and lifted staggering tons of green water to roar aft over the break of the forecastle head. So far he detected no uneasiness in the *Dark Star's* behavior, nothing to warrant any suspicion of her seaworthiness.

"You evidently loaded her to the queen's taste," he told Mr. Greening.

The mate, dressed in his usual careful style, seemed to accept the compliment modestly. "I like a steady ship, sir."

"How will she handle if we have to stow that two hundred tons on the after deck under hatches?" Tom went on negligently.

Greening cast a sidewise glance at his youthful commander and ventured a shrug of his shoulders, sole response. Edwards repeated his question curtly.

"I figure she'll stand it all right, sir."

Edwards nodded and resumed his walk to and fro on the bridge, a habit he could not break himself of though he was now a captain. He said no more, and in an hour went down to his cabin and then to the engine room.

"Mr. Malcolmson," he said briefly, "I am going to change the trim of the ship."

The chief wiped his hands on a bit of waste and cocked one eye on his superior.

"Is it advice you want, sir? Don't."

"You think I'd best leave well enough alone?"

Malcolmson nodded. "I'm trimming the bunkers with a teaspoon," he said. "I find she's pretty tender, sir. If you start trimming cargo you'll leave me all at sixes and sevens."

Edwards stared at Malcolmson coldly. "That may be all very well, chief. We've got two hundred tons on the after deck. I'm going to get it below before this good weather breaks. She's pretty wet already. I see no use in risking good cargo when we can stow it properly."

"What hold are you going to put it in, sir?" the engineer rasped.

"Number two, for'a'd of your engine room."

"That's bring her by the head, sir."

Edwards nodded carelessly. "Yes. We'll see how she stands up that way. If she acts badly we'll fill the after peak to hold her propeller down."

Malcolmson said nothing. He went on with his work. His attitude was that of a man who had done his best and expected the worst.

When Edwards announced to the mate his intention of opening hatches and stowing the deck load below, Greening was put wholly out of countenance. He became almost insulting. His effeminate face twitched with anger, his voice broke, he clenched his white hands and swore vilely. His commander listened with a curious expression of satisfaction. He repeated his orders curtly and with finality.

"Gad," he told himself when he was again alone, "I'll not wait for these fellows and their set time. Greening is the party the Inter-ocean looks to for its dirty work. He never expected to shift that cargo till he was good and ready—when we were in sight of Cape Sarachef. That was the point he was to wreck us. Now we'll see about it. We'll just advance the date and shift that cargo now. If it makes her turn turtle we'll all go down together and nobody will get back to San Francisco and collect the reward father offered."

In the evening Edwards sent for the bos'n. Padger arrived promptly, cap in hand, his grizzled, neat head respectfully bent before his captain.

"Bos'n," Edwards said quietly, "you're an honest seaman. I want you to listen to me carefully. I want you to keep all I tell you strictly to yourself."

Padger met his eyes steadily. "I do my duty, sir."

"I know it," Edwards answered. "There is dirty work on foot on this steamship. Because I'm a young man they think I'm blind or afraid to face 'em. I'm going to show 'em where I stand. To-morrow I'm going to give orders for that stuff on the after deck to be stowed in number-two hold."

The bos'n's oaken visage cracked slightly. "Very good, sir."

With all the clearness he could Edwards explained to the old man the plight he was in. He named nobody, but his meaning and his inferences were not to be mistaken. Padger heard, his wooden countenance set in an expression of tolerance. When his captain had finished he made a single comment:

"They foxed you, sir, when they put that two hundred tons on deck. Anyway you look at it, that two hundred tons is bad business. In bad weather it 'u'd carry overside, which would lose it and spoil the ship's trim. If we stow it, sir, it'll make things worse."

"It would, bos'n, if I weren't in command of this packet and didn't know my business. The reason I sent for you and explained all this to you is because I have to have some one trustworthy man who knows why I am going to do what I am going to do. I take the responsibility. You obey orders, even if they seem to break owners. I intend to bring this steamship safely into Hakodate."

To explain the predicament Mr. Greening had put his commander in, we must understand the figures which he had relied on and the calculations he had made on them as a basis.

The *Dark Star*, like all vessels, had a load line, established when she was built, at which she was most seaworthy. This load line also indicated her best trim, which in her case was drawing much more aft than forward. Greening had so arranged the stowing of the cargo that the two hundred tons lashed on the after deck effected the final trim needful to make the steamer answer engines and helm. It also decreased her rolling considerably, according to a familiar law. Should this weight be swept overside and the *Dark Star* thus relieved of two hundred tons directly over her propeller, she would instantly

rise aft and sink more deeply at her bows, thus making her by the head—and unseaworthy. Stowing this cargo forward would effect the same alteration in the ship's trim and make her roll more heavily. In brief, whatever change was made in the position of this two hundred tons, the *Dark Star* became unhandy and very likely unmanageable.

Having reasoned this out, Edwards had gone further and calculated exactly what was needful to counteract the transfer of the deck cargo under hatches. In doing this, he had discovered that his vessel was, unmistakably, wholly unseaworthy as she now was loaded. If she continued to meet with good weather on her voyage, she would have no trouble. If she fell into a storm, she would stand a great chance of going down. In any event, it would be more than easy for Greening, in his capacity as chief mate, to cut the lashings of the deck load and allow it to be washed overboard, thus instantly putting the *Dark Star* at a terrible disadvantage.

Edwards was convinced that there was but one thing to do: anticipate the design of the man who had plotted to wreck him, make the change which would sooner or later be necessary during good weather, retrim his ship, and so proceed on the voyage. But there was grave peril to be incurred during the operation itself. For some time the *Dark Star* would be wholly unmanageable in any sea; there were the weightiest arguments against an attempt to alter her trim by emptying water ballast tanks; the whole business might end in disaster. He closed the argument with himself by the bold axiom that desperate maladies require desperate measures. Tom Edwards was going to wait no longer for the impending blow. With Padger's coöperation and plain acquaintance with the facts, no one could afterward lay a false accusation of barratry.

All that night Tom kept the bridge, peering ahead into the dim spaces of the windy night, calculating the strength of the seas, feeling the weight of the wind, going over his desperate reckonings. When Greening came up at four o'clock he calmly repeated his instructions, and within ten minutes the bos'n had the carpenter opening number-two hatches, a couple of winchmen warming up the deck winches, and the hands rigging whips from the cargo booms along the bridge deck alleyways. When all was ready Edwards rang the engines down to quarter speed and laid the steamer's head so that she rode her easiest.

An hour passed and the captain thanked his stars that Padger not only knew his business, but took a personal pride in doing the job swiftly. At noon the deck load was over half stowed. Another watch would see the end of it.

"And high time, too!" Edwards told himself, watching the barometer. He turned to see Greening at his shoulder. That usually debonair officer was evidently struggling to restrain himself and keep within bounds. It struck his commander that the mate suspected the truth, knew himself to be found out.

"She's already drawing a foot and a half more for'a'd than aft, sir," Greening mumbled.

Edwards nodded briskly. "I fancy so."

Greening plucked up courage to continue, in a high, rasping voice: "What's the great idea, sir? To lose your ship?"

The man he addressed stiffened suddenly. Very slowly he turned around and faced his chief officer. He stared into his suffused eyes, saw the slight dribble at the corners of his lips, and relaxed.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Greening," Edwards said in a muffled tone. "Don't be silly! Best get on deck and see that the hands don't soldier." He resumed his absorbed study of the barometer, as if its delicate machinery was equal to foretelling profounder matters than wind and weather. Here Mr. Malcolmson found him. The chief was thoughtful.

"How soon will you be done with this maneuver, sir?" he inquired.

Edwards scratched his head dubiously. "Look ye here, chief," he remarked. "The glass is simply tumbling down. Looks much like one of those rotten easterly gales they have up here."

"And drawing a foot and a half by the head, sir."

"It'll be two feet and a half by sundown when it's all stowed below," Edwards responded. "Then it depends how the weather is whether we go on trimming ship. If the sea gets up too much, we'll have to wait before we empty the for'a'd tanks and fill the after peak."

"Why wait?" the engineer asked significantly.

A smile answered him. The noise of the

winches outside drowned out the muttered words. Malcolmson nodded, comprehending thoroughly what the captain meant to convey.

"If she's as tender as all *that*," he said, raising his voice, "it's time you got that stuff shifted below decks."

"You're burning the coal out of the bunkers," Edwards returned. "In another five days you'll have emptied the wings and then—look out!"

"Bad business filling and pumping water ballast tanks in a seaway," Malcolmson affirmed, as though the question had been raised as to its advisability. Edwards saw that the old man knew exactly the peril of an ill-laden, ill-balanced ship with loose tons of water rolling in her hold. A touch might send her beyond her righting angle, to lie on her beam ends or go on completely over. There is always a period during the process of filling a tank, or of emptying it, when the water is free to rush to one side or another.

"It's going to blow," the captain remarked, as if changing the subject. "To-night."

"We shan't be able to steam into any head sea in this shape," Malcolmson replied, with equal dogmatism.

Edwards nodded. "I don't expect her to. There are a good many ways of fetching a port beside whistling for a tug." He gave no further intimation of his intentions, and the chief went his way, solemnly steadfast in his duty.

When the last huge packing case had been stowed under hatches, and the carpenter had battened down again, it was coming on dark, with a gusty wind before which the sea mounted by perceptible degrees. Mr. Greening made no doubts of what was going to happen: the *Dark Star* would be unmanageable, fall off into the trough, be swept clean, deluged, shattered, sunk. He watched Edwards' calm attempt to get the steamship to steam into the squalls and the heavy sea with eyes that seemed blistered with hate and despair.

"I thought he was a bold man," Edwards told himself as he watched the unsuccess of his maneuver. "The man is yellow. He's lost his nerve." He felt a sense of triumph in having thus turned the man's own projected plan against him, in having anticipated him, while still a thousand miles short of the point where Greening had planned to execute the job for which he bore the unholy commission. "It makes a difference when the old packet is hundreds of miles offshore in a rising gale," he told himself. "Now we'll put Mr. Greening through his paces. I don't believe he's a seaman at all." He strode to the engineer-room telegraph, threw it over to stop, and ordered the helm hard a-port. While the quartermaster was still putting the wheel over the *Dark Star* flung her bows upward with a terrific thrust, held them aloft for a long second, and then dropped them into the very heart of an onrushing sea which creamed up over the forecastle head and poured aft in a tremendous, roaring flood. The forward deck was filled. The steamer was held down, straining mortally while her propeller rose into the air as the stern was lifted, fairly pried out of the water by the terrific leverage of the weighted forepart of the ship. Edwards watched the event with eyes intent on the telltale structure of the forecastle head, which stood out of the tumultuous sea like a lonely rock. And all the while his acute senses caught all the messages of planks yielding under foot, beams buckling, frames twisting, and plates vibrating. The *Dark Star* was slowly being forced out of her shape; she was giving in to the resistless might of the sea. Her commander's hand rested on the useless engine-room telegraph.

Some reserve of buoyancy saved the vessel, however. The bows began to rise, the forecastle head emerged farther from the welter of broken water, then soared upward magnificently. The stern swooped downward, the screw was driven into solid water, the tiller ropes sang under the strain of the rudder taking hold. Edwards jammed the signal lever to full astern. And instantly the body of the *Dark Star* came to sonorous life as her machines resumed their function. The next sea thundered under the bows and threw her head around. Edwards eased the helm, and to the thrust of her whirling propeller blades the steamer drew off in a wide circle, gained sternboard and pulled herself irresistibly into a position where she took the rushing seas in the quarter. So she lay, pitching easily, rolling and lurching but safe for the moment. Her captain slowed his engines a few turns and breathed deeply. Then he addressed the watch officer: "She'll ride this way, I think."

Mr. Ticknor nodded and pulled his sou'wester down about his ears. He coughed

as the smoke from the funnel swirled about them. But he managed a grin.

Mr. Greening gaped and waved one arm desperately. Edwards glowered and motioned him to come nearer. "What is it, mister?"

"How'll you get her back," the mate shouted in his ear.

"She's on her course now," Edwards replied.

Infinite relief spread over Mr. Greening's effeminate face. "You're running back to the coast, sir?"

"I'm going to steam astern for Japan," was the response. "We ought to make three knots an hour this way. When this gale blows itself out we'll fill ballast tanks and head her about and go forward instead of backward."

The chief mate stared, wiped his mottled face with a dirty hand, and swore vilely.

"You'll lose her," he cried.

Edwards scowled at him. "What's the difference between losing her here like men to wrecking her off Sarachef like rascals?" he demanded. Then the sense of his wrongs, of the great wrong this man intended to do him, brushed away all restraints of policy: "You wanted to do her in where you could save your own fat carcass. I know you, Greening! I've got it in for you! Blast you, I'll bring the *Dark Star* in, in spite of you. Now you get about your duty and do it to the queen's taste, or you won't arrive with the rest of us."

"You are going to try to kill me!" panted Greening, totally overwhelmed.

"Pah! I'm going to make a sailorman out of you!"

Mr. Malcolmson gave his whole-hearted approval to the maneuver when he came on deck presently and had observed the ship's behavior for a while. For the first time during the voyage he unbent enough to remark that Edwards knew his business. Tom drew him into his own cabin and told him about Greening and what he was suspected of attempting. The chief listened and asked a single question: "What ship was he last in?"

"*Rampoa*," Edwards replied.

Mr. Malcolmson fidgeted. "I've heard some sorry tales of that packet," he murmured. "Some people make no bones of saying she was cast away for the insurance. But I never heard the name Greening connected with it."

"He told me himself she turned turtle one night."

"The *Rampoa?* She never turned turtle at all, sir. She caught fire down in the Bismarcks and was finally abandoned."

Edwards and Malcolmson stared at each other. The engineer suddenly burst into a cackling laugh. "The man gave himself away right there, sir. He got *Rampoa* and *Dark Star* slightly mixed, as such swine will mix their stories. The *Rampoa* burned. It was the *Dark Star* which was to have capsized."

CHAPTER VIII.

The following day the gale went down and with it the sea. By mid-afternoon Edwards was able to bring his vessel round and set his engines ahead and steer a fair course. True, the *Dark Star* was hard to handle in her new trim. Now and then she took a sheer that could only be met by using the engines. But she did better than could be expected, and her captain figured on several days of satisfactory westing.

His chief problem now was the mate. Greening had had his warning. It was perfectly plain that either he or Edwards must knuckle under in this contest. The defeated man would lose his all: name, reputation, freedom—life, possibly. In fact, only one could survive. If the mate did not achieve his purpose he knew quite well that he would be denounced as a criminal the moment the *Dark Star* reached San Francisco again. The score against him was complete.

Edwards, on the other hand, had the single purpose of getting his vessel safely to port. The slightest attempt to plead stress of weather or act of God would inevitably bring Greening and his fellow plotters down on him with their accusations of barratry. He realized that he had left San Francisco under suspicion of intending to cast away his steamship. He could let nothing give color to this. His success must be final, unquestionable. And he could not see how he was to get the *Dark Star* across the Pacific, unless the weather remained favorable. Optimistic as his success during the gale just past had made him, he could not blind himself to the grim fact that the steamer was practically unfit to face the mildest gale or the smoothest sea. She was leaking badly. Rivets were sheering. Malcolmson made no parley about his boilers.

"Any minute," the chief had said calmly. "It's murder to keep a watch below."

And the steamer was now three feet by the head.

The young man pondered his problem by himself. He knew perfectly well what ought to be accomplished. But perils known and sure stood in the way. Were they worse than the perils unknown and incalculable that stood between him and Hakodate? Should he carry on, letting things go as they were and trust to luck? Or take a very present risk in order to make his ship readier for the test any day might bring?

His debate was concluded by the intrusion of a fact. In taking a wide sheer the *Dark Star* was met by helm and propeller. She quietly lay over at an angle of twenty degrees and remained there.

Greening now seemed to think his interests the same as the captain's. He resumed his former casual manner, but offered suggestions that showed he had studied the problem carefully and knew what he was talking about.

"The fires have burned up two hundred tons of coal and lightened the ship by so much," he told Edwards. "This has altered her whole balance. The forward part is properly loaded now, and is not topheavy; the after part, all abaft the engine room, has lost its stability and would promptly capsize were it not for the stability of the forepart of the steamer. Naturally this makes a terrific twisting strain on the midship portion, which holds the two parts together. So long as the stability of the portion forward of the engine room is greater than the lack of stability of the after portion we shall stay upright, or only have a list. The question is, of course, how long the two ends stay together."

"Or how soon plates buckle and frames give and rivets sheer and the *Dark Star* breaks in two," Malcolmson added thoughtfully.

Edwards nodded. "That's a pretty fair explanation of the matter as it stands," he admitted. "I knew it before. What I want your advice on is how to remedy it—how to sink the after part of the ship four feet and at the same time put weight enough below the beams to make her stable."

"Water ballast," Greening said promptly.

"With this list to port?" Edwards demanded sarcastically. "I wonder how the chief likes the suggestion of pumping water into empty tanks while the ship has a twenty degree list."

"She'd simply go on over," the chief remarked.

As they spoke the steamer rose on a long roller, hung a moment, and then suddenly listed to starboard. Edwards glanced at the brass pendulum swung on the bulkhead.

"Now she's got a twenty-degree list on the other tack," he said.

Malcolmson raised his eyes to the topmasts, now leaning out over the heaving sea. He seemed to withdraw himself from this discussion, as though it was vain and somewhere destiny was calling for silence.

Suddenly the chief seemed to rouse himself. Ignoring the mate, he drew Edwards aside. He grinned sheepishly into his stern face.

"After all, captain, it's worth while to get to port with a whole skin. I've got a wife. Some one's waiting for you. Why disappoint 'em, eh? Let's get this old packet on her legs again and be on our way."

"All right, chief!" the skipper answered in a loud voice full of confidence, "we'll straighten our steamer up as she should be and be moving." He blew his whistle, and a quartermaster appeared.

"Send the bos'n here," he ordered.

Padger appeared, booted, sou'westered, with a lashing of twine about his oilskins. His grizzled face showed like a bit of pale flame. He looked at his commander with the solemn eyes of experience.

"Unshackle both anchors, hook tackles on to the cable ends, and haul the cables aft and stow 'em in the after wing bunkers—each on its own side." Edwards turned to Greening. "See that the lashings of the anchors aren't disturbed, mister. Then watch the hands that they haul both cables aft through the main-deck alleyways evenly. Chief, I'll leave it to you to judge what you can do below, even to drawing fires under a couple of boilers and filling them with water. We'll soon see how this vessel is going to behave."

The task took three hours. The *Dark Star* quietly resumed her upright position. Under reduced steam she drove ahead on her course.

"This will answer a while," Edwards told the engineer. "Now we'll watch a chance to run up the after-ballast tanks."

At midnight, the sea being smooth and the wind on the quarter, the order was given

to fill the tanks. At three in the morning Edwards quietly experimented and found his vessel fairly stable but very tender. The next day he expected to sight Cape Sarachef.

"I'd best do a little inquiring around the neighborhood," he told himself, and sought the wireless station. The operator listened to his instructions and set to work. At daylight Edwards found the chief and told him the news.

"As I expected, two Inter-ocean steamers are hugging the cape ahead waiting for us to cry for help," he said. "No need to worry. I'm not going to send for help in any event. But a word in your ear: stand by, yourself. I don't trust Greening."

Nothing, however, happened. The *Dark Star* raised a dull, mist-wreathed block of land which loomed and faded to the north, altered her course a trifle and steamed steadily away into the blank again. The next day the weather softened and she picked up her speed a little, and for the week showed a satisfying mileage. But just as Edwards was congratulating himself that the voyage was nearly over, with but three more days to go before entering Psugar Straits, Greening himself, at four in the morning, brought the news of the one irretrievable disaster. Edwards looked at the man from over the edge of the berth and appeared to be gathering himself for a spring upon him. The mate's soft, smooth face was inscrutable. He balanced himself in the doorway and merely waited for orders. An instant later he was thrown bodily into a corner as his commander leaped past him to the deck.

Down in his engine room, his eyes fixed on the steadily beating pulse of his machines, Chief Malcolmson sniffed the air that eddied down the ventilator and was vaguely uneasy.

CHAPTER IX.

Dick Hawley lay on the wide lounge in the sitting room of his apartment and stared at the ceiling. A few feet away Alicia Stillings sat with a book in her lap. Through the open doorway could be seen a woman in nurse's garb asleep in a chair. The windows were shaded against the bright afternoon sun, and the rooms seemed appointed for quiet. But Alicia was rebellious against it all. She had kept still for some time. Now she resolved to speak.

"Dick, you're not getting well, and nobody will ever know the truth. It's high season we were thinking of the *Dark Star*."

Hawley brought his gaze down.

"Tom Edwards was silly to sail against all orders," he said weakly. "He's quite out of our power to help—now."

"He did what he did to save the day," Alicia answered. "I can see that he was right. It ought to have made us brace up, Dick, and go the limit."

"What is the limit—in this case?" the sick man demanded. "I've done my best—except for that nonsense when I was distracted."

"I'm not blaming you," she said gently. "But Tom took what was really a challenge and is gone. If we look at it truthfully we've got to acknowledge that the only thing that will save all of us is the safe arrival of his steamer, isn't it?"

"We're ditched if the *Dark Star* is lost," Hawley admitted wearily. "Don't I know it? But, then, that's only Tom and I who get hurt. You're out of it, Alicia, thank God! We're only a couple of men you've been frightfully nice to—what happens to us doesn't matter, really."

"I have a different notion of friendship than that," she responded with indignation. "Why, I've thought of nothing else since I knew about the *Dark Star*."

"But—you can't get mixed up in an affair like this," Dick protested. "It won't do, Alicia! I forbid you! I could never forgive myself if your name was even breathed in a matter where it looks as if there was going to be a scandal. Robert Edwards is utterly conscienceless. He would drag you in on any pretext. He would try his best to implicate you in the supposed casting away of the steamer. You have no idea what a beast he is!"

"The fact remains," she returned coldly, "that Tom is a friend of yours and mine and when—when something happened, he never hesitated but went ahead. We can't abandon him!"

"Abandon him! Didn't I send orders to him not to sail? Didn't you tell him how important it was for him not to sail? And he went off without a word of excuse—simply took the bit in his teeth. *He* abandoned *us*. Anyway, I don't see what we could possibly do. The *Dark Star* is somewhere out in the Pacific and we're here."

"The *Dark Star* is eight days overdue in Hakodate, Dick."

"Weather, likely. Maybe boiler trouble. Anything might happen to delay Tom's getting in. He's got wireless."

"He swore he wouldn't use the wireless to call for help."

"Young man's oaths don't always stand," Dick remarked with an invalid's privilege to be nasty.

Alicia was stubborn. "Anyway, he's more than a week past due, and no wireless has been picked up. If that doesn't mean he's in trouble but sticking to his word, what does it mean?"

"I refuse to argue," Hawley replied, smiling. "I take my stand on facts: we are absolutely helpless."

Alicia rose and closed the door on the nurse, giving a vague impression of shutting out the matter-of-fact world.

"I've studied day and night since the *Dark Star* sailed," she told Hawley from her place by the window. "I never thought about what business is for me before. Now I see that terrible things can happen. I"—she hesitated slightly—"I think I see a little further into this matter than either you or Tom wished me to. Some of the boys we both know have been talking wildly. You say I must not be mixed up in this. But I'm already mixed up in it! They just as good as say that Tom quarreled with his father over me and had to quit because he wouldn't give in."

Hawley frowned. "Did Tom ever breathe anything like that?"

Alicia flushed. "No. That's what makes it hard. People cannot understand that I *like* Tom for not speaking to me and simply fighting the quarrel out. It's such a manful thing to do. Now he's out at sea somewhere with all these men laughing and preening themselves because they think he's never coming back. Even his father has let it be known that he thought Tom an idiot, as he puts it, to throw his lot in with crooks."

The man on the lounge stirred restlessly. "We're not crooks!"

"Who is to prove we're not, if Tom doesn't come back with the steamer?" she demanded. "You insured it. If it doesn't reach port you'll collect the money, won't you? You'll simply have to, or confess that the voyage was crooked. And when you start to collect Robert Edwards will accuse you of wrecking a worthless vessel to get the insurance."

"And in doing that he'll smirch his own name. Even Robert won't dare go beyond hints—and God knows they're hard enough to bear."

Alicia was silent a while. Her fine face was turned to the shaded window. No one who knew her less intimately than Hawley would have suspected she was fighting with all her spirit against destiny. He perceived that some profound decision rested on her heart like a burden at once exhausting and invigorating. He waited.

"Is all your money invested in the *Dark Star?*" she asked sudddenly.

"Every cent of mine, and some borrowed money is tied up in the steamer and in three thousand tons of stuff in Vladivostok," he answered quietly.

"Then you'll have to do as I say," she went on. "I have my fortune. I have thirty thousand dollars I can put my hands on."

In spite of his wound Hawley raised himself desperately on one elbow. "No!" he cried brokenly. "No!" He fell back almost unconscious. Alicia quickly went to him and skillfully gave him the medicine she had seen the nurse administer. Then she said in his ear: "You're too sick to do anything, Dick. But you must help me with your advice. Tell me what to do with thirty thousand to help Tom."

Hawley met her earnest and benign gaze and his own wavering eyes steadied. He seemed to gather his thoughts into coherence, to force himself in this crisis to meet the emergency.

"See Peter Simpson," he croaked. "Oakland." He closed his eyes wearily. "He's honest—and he knows Robert Edwards as I know him."

Alicia wrote the name down on a page of a tiny memorandum book and called the nurse. At the door she threw a last lingering, compassionate look at the dying man. She went on out.

Captain Peter Simpson kept a modest ship chandler's place across the bay. He carried both the cares of his business and the disabilities of his sixty-five years with perfect good humor. It was his boast among his cronies that he was still the equal of any younger man. When she started to find him Alicia discovered that San Francisco held many notabilities she had never heard of. Peter Simpson was one.

He received her with a flourish when she entered his dingy shop on the banks of Oakland Creek, handed her a freshly dusted

chair, put his own hat out of sight, and seated himself like a portly old philanthropist on a well-worn bench.

"Is it Red Cross or Infants' Milk or Belgian Farmers', miss?" he inquired with every appearance of being prepared instantly to subscribe generously to any cause.

Alicia smiled. "None of those things, Mr. Simpson."

"Captain Simpson, ma'am."

"I mean, Captain Simpson."

He relaxed the gravity he had assumed to enforce the correction and smiled. She saw that above his ruddy, pleasant mouth eyes as chill as steel shone under grizzled brows.

"Mr. Hawley—Dick Hawley advised me to see you."

Captain Simpson acknowledged the introduction with a perceptible sniff.

"About an investment," she added hastily.

Captain Simpson leaned forward anxiously. "Did he mention that I am honest, ma'am?"

"He did," Alicia replied.

"I am not!" the captain retorted with every evidence of a triumph over his worse self. "Distinctly not!" He glared at her savagely. "I used to be honest once—when I was younger. I've learned better. I'm reformed. I'm no longer an honest man. I can look every respectable, penny-pinching, dollar-grabbing, self-righteous citizen of California right in the eye without winking and slap my chest and announce that I, for one, am a dishonest man. There you have Peter Simpson—a d—d old rascal. Now, what's on your mind, ma'am? I hope to goodness it's something shady that I can bite into and enjoy myself over."

Alicia was tremendously perturbed by this proclamation. She became confused over a dozen plausible excuses for running away and ended by murmuring: "It's the *Dark Star*."

Captain Simpson stared an instant, then recovered himself. "The Lord love all sailormen! The *Dark Star!*" His cold blue eyes gleamed. "And how are you interested in that rotten old packet, ma'am?"

"Dick—Mr. Hawley sent her on a voyage to Japan and she hasn't turned up," Alicia stammered.

"The Lord love *you*, too!" Simpson responded gruffly. "He didn't expect her to turn up, did he? The only turning up the *Dark Star* was ever meant to do was turning wrong side up, ma'am. How much money did you have on her? Come now! Let's have a decent fib."

"No money," Alicia replied indignantly.

"No money, eh? Um-m-*hum-m!* Who is the young gentleman, then, you invested in Dick Hawley's old steamer?"

Alicia had never imagined that so savage an aspect as Captain Simpson presented at this moment could be combined with such a voice; round, resonant, appealing, compassionate, respectful, and tender. The rough words lost all their incivility. She leaned back and yielded to the spell of those tones.

"I didn't invest anything. Dick Hawley is an old family friend and the captain of the *Dark Star*, too, Captain Simpson. And Dick has put all his money in the voyage, and the steamer's 'way overdue and we're —I'm afraid."

"Young Tom Edwards went skipper, I know," the captain remarked. "I hear talk." He wagged his head with incredible gravity.

"It's all false!" Alicia protested.

"I know—eminently honest people, and all that, say Dick Hawley planned to cast the old packet away for the insurance. As an eminently dishonest man, acquainted with every kind of crookedness, I don't believe a word Robert Edwards and his crowd say. Dick Hawley hasn't brains enough to go into such a deal. He's utterly incapable of a thumping fraud like that. He is, ma'am. As a consequence he has lost his money. The *Dark Star* is lost."

"Are you sure?" Alicia looked at the old man as though he had some secret source of information."

"No, of course not, ma'am," he answered promptly. "But she *will* be lost."

"We must prevent it," Alicia cried.

Captain Simpson displayed signs of ill-temper. "Who are you to dictate the annulment of the act of God, ma'am? Any man who ever figured that steamer knows that she's unseaworthy. Of course, she'll be lost —unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless that sprig of a skipper knows his business better than most of the master mariners that infest the Pacific these days," Simpson thundered. "Who the dickens is he, to take charge of a cargo ship—on a long voyage—a child? A babe in arms?"

She had to smile at this description but stuck to her point. "I have thirty thousand dollars, Captain Simpson," she said shyly.

He waved this into the void. "Consider it

lost," he boomed melodiously. "What's thirty thousand among thieves? Nothing. I get part, Dick gets part, Tom Edwards gets part, and you have a receipted bill from the piper. Pooh!"

"Isn't it enough?" she pleaded.

"Enough? Enough for what, in Heaven's name?"

"To go and get the *Dark Star*.'

Captain Simpson rose, searched for his hat vainly, gave it up, and sat down again.

"Plenty," he said abruptly. "Now, tell me all about it."

For an hour Alicia narrated what she knew and what she had heard about the unlucky ship and Hawley's venture with it. The only matter she concealed was Tom Edwards' quarrel with his father over her. When she had finished Peter Simpson studied the dingy ceiling of his office for a long time. Finally he appeared to have finished his calculations.

"I want all that thirty thousand down," he said crossly.

Alicia was overwhelmed. "Is it—is it business to pay it all out at once?" she asked.

"No, certainly not, ma'am. Neither is this scheme of going after that old packet, business. I haven't concealed from you my utter contempt for honesty. I'm dishonest and proud of it. No skulduggery about me. I take your money and give you no choice. Pooh! Have you really got thirty thousand dollars, ma'am?"

"Yes," she murmured, appalled by the prospect.

"I'm bitterly disappointed," Captain Simpson roared. "I have a notion not to have anything to do with you. Aren't you educated? Aren't you a sensible, respectable girl? Why didn't you tell me you had thirty thousand, but you couldn't get at it and you'd pay me five thousand? Pooh! The very idea of coming into my office and throwing thirty thousand dollars at me. Don't you know that a cash customer always gets the worst of it? Pooh! You'd better learn wisdom before it's too late."

"But I'll gladly pay that amount to save the *Dark Star*," she insisted boldly.

"And you want me to swear I'll rescue your young man? And when I do you'll give me a receipt for him—value received? I refuse. I'll take your thirty thousand, but I'll guarantee nothing." Captain Simpson assumed an air of virtue.

"When can you start?" Alicia demanded, ignoring this.

"If I can lay hands on my hat I'll be off now," Simpson replied with energy. He pawed the papers on his littered desk and stirred the dust on shelves laden with rusty files.

"Will to-morrow do for the money?" she went on, strangely reassured.

"I suppose it'll have to," he answered, finally seizing his hat from a wastebasket. "Excuse me, ma'am. Give me your address. I'll be up to see you to-night. Sail to-morrow, with the money sewed up in a blanket and deposited with the steward for safe-keeping."

Alicia wrote down the address and left with a feeling that, while she had shared her secret, she had by no means parted with her burden of responsibility.

"He's so queer!" she thought. "If Dick Hawley hadn't sent me to him I'd think it was all silliness."

But that evening the maid ushered Captain Simpson into the music room of the Stillings house with many a side glance at his portly frame and rubicund visage. Alicia received him almost doubtfully. He was an incongruous figure in the big room, just as were the three articles which Alicia kept there in spite of her mother and other artistic souls. Yet he had something seamanlike and breezy about him which did not offend.

He seated himself and began promptly: "I have a small twelve-knot steamer ready to sail to-morrow. She is put down as perfectly sound, well-fitted and seaworthy—which is a lie, a black falsehood. But no matter. Sail she shall with me aboard, if you say the words, ma'am."

"And you'll find the *Dark Star*, captain?"

He glared suddenly and ferociously. "No. Of course I won't—unless an accident happens."

"And how much will it cost?"

"You said thirty thousand," he answered with increasing severity.

Alicia smiled. "I mean, how much shall I give you now?"

The response was a beaming smile. "Six thousand, ma'am. It may cost more eventually, but that'll see me on my way. When I come back I'll probably want the other twenty-four thousand."

"I'm going, too," she told him quietly.

Captain Simpson looked petrified. He stared about the great room and its furnish-

ings and then at its young mistress. Something much like distress showed in his keen eyes.

"It can't be done, ma'am."

"It must," Alicia answered with finality.

"I shall speak to your parents," Simpson threatened.

"I've told them already."

"Spineless!" he roared. "I'd like to see a daughter o' mine galivanting off across the sea after an unseaworthy steamer and an empty-headed sprig of a youngster who didn't know when he was well off."

"Would you?" she returned sweetly. "How many daughters have you?"

"Six," he answered in a suddenly subdued tone. "They take after me—sometimes."

"Would one of them go along for company for me?"

"On that old tub the *Rachel* that I'm going on? I should say not!"

"But you'll say yes?"

Captain Simpson was silent.

"I'll pay her well," Alicia remarked.

The captain nodded. "You have me. I'm an entirely, utterly abandoned man. I'll sell my girl's safety for a thousand. That's me. Money first and always. Which one will you take?"

"Which one would you choose?" Alicia said.

"Martha," Simpson told her promptly. "No fatherly feelings shall stand in the way. Off she goes to-morrow with you and me, willy-nilly. I'll wake her up and tell her so. Pooh! What are a few tears, in comparison with money? Pooh! Martha goes if the ship sinks inside the Farallons—which would be a heavenly good bit of luck for all of us if it happened."

Alicia wrote out a check for six thousand and handed it over.

"We sail at noon from Oakland Long Wharf. If you're six seconds late you don't go," the captain informed her. "Better be half an hour ahead of time and get acquainted with my girl. Of course, you may find no steamer there, nor me, either. In that case count your six thousand well lost. Don't attempt to find me."

"I can see that you are an incorrigible rascal," Alicia remarked with a smile.

Captain Simpson's stony blue eyes met hers. "I am. Years ago I found it paid. I have no truck with respectable people like Robert Edwards and Emerson Scott and the rest of them. You know me! I'm open and aboveboard. I defy any man to say I ever got an honest penny in my life, ma'am. Good night!"

With her mother Alicia made a hasty visit to Dick Hawley's apartment. The nurse reported complications and advised a short stay at the bedside, with many references to obscure technical terms.

Dick put the matter bluntly. "I'm dying," he told Alicia while her mother fidgeted on a chair some distance away. "What have you found out?"

"Oh, Dick, I'm going with Captain Peter Simpson to-morrow to find Tom!"

Hawley's pinched face colored faintly. "You'll forgive an old man?" he whispered. "I should ha' stayed with the game and fought it out. Tell Tom I'm sorry. I've fixed it all right for him. And tell him, Alicia, not to waste his life as I did. I quit and that ended me. Never quit. I'll not see either of you again. But whatever you do, remember never to quit. Stick—stick it always——"

His eyes closed, and the nurse interfered masterfully.

As she left Mrs. Stillings wondered audibly at the eccentricities of fate.

"I never could understand why men would go into business when they were unfitted for it," she remarked. "I suppose it's the money they want. But there is nothing to be gained by it."

The wisdom of this was so profound that Alicia looked startled for a moment. Then she recognized her mother's habitual summing up of all things which she either did not understand or disliked, and merely smiled.

In her own room the girl faced the facts with a sinking heart. The unvarnished truth was that she was going on a mad adventure with no better justification than a deep longing in her own inner spirit which she dared not openly recognize. Hers were clear eyes when she turned them on her own world: it would mock her, shun her, crush her, if it knew all that she risked. But she was supported in this sorry moment by the vision of Tom Edwards, standing on the bridge of a sinking ship, watching the eastern horizon for a sail.

CHAPTER X.

Captain Edwards' first impression when he reached the deck of the *Dark Star* from his cabin was that he had been deceived. The steamer was heading into a light swell

and pitching easily and smoothly. A baffling wind blew across the expanse shimmering under the stars, and swept the funnel smoke now up, now down. He could see every line of the ship distinctly. Nothing showed anywhere that could indicate an interior blaze. He walked on aft to the break of the bridge deck and then down on the after deck. All was quiet here. He found nothing to excite suspicion. Yet Mr. Greening had said plainly: "The cargo's afire in the after hold."

Edwards stood thoughtful a moment. Then from somewhere rose the faintest possible breath of blistering paint, a mere whiff that instantly vanished. He stood balanced on the gently tilting planks and waited. Presently he smelled again that delicate, evasive, and terrifying odor. He went and laid his hand on the hatch tarpaulin. It was cold. He felt the deck plates. Nothing there to point to heat below. He stood, puzzled. And again that unmistakable smell of fire swept up and stung his nostrils. He swung on his heel and entered the port alleyway where he traveled along slowly, one hand on the steel wall of the engine room. Presently he reached a door and emerged into the clangor of the ship's heart. There he stood for a brief interval, inhaling the pungent air that rose from steam pipes and hurrying machinery. Then he went down to the working platform. Chief Malcolmson glanced at him with an odd expression on his grimy visage.

"Do you know anything about a fire in the cargo, chief?" Edwards inquired in a low tone.

Instantly the engineer's face cleared. "By Jove, I wondered! So it's fire, is it?"

"The mate says so," was the curt response.

Malcolmson looked up at the gauge dials and said simply: "He ought to know."

"What a diabolical assertion!" was the captain's first thought. He scrutinized the old man's features. They were calm, assured; they told of nothing except perfect self-confidence.

"You mean to tell me——" Edwards began hotly.

"Nothing, sir," Malcolmson replied promptly. "Where is the fire?"

"I don't know," was the reply.

The engineer shouted an order to an oiler, saw the man on his way to execute it, and turned to his superior. "Where did the mate say it was?" he inquired mildly.

"After hold. Say—look here, this won't do, you know."

"I do hate a fire at sea," the chief went on dispassionately. "And it'll play the devil with us, too."

Sudden realization of what he was doing broke on Edwards. He vented an exclamation and said across his shoulder as he jumped for the ladder: "And me standing down here talking!" He vanished into the structure above. Malcolmson looked after him and shot a sour glance at the lofty cylinders.

This time the young skipper wasted no time in vain queries. Whether the chief engineer was justified or not in his horrid suggestion that Greening was responsible for the fire, the great question was to make sure that it existed or did not. On deck the same baffling whiffs of invisible fumes spoke loudly of the reality of disaster. But a further examination elicited nothing to prove it. Edwards was on the point of summoning the carpenter to knock the battens off the hatch when Padger, the bos'n, appeared, sedulous and prompt.

"There's an infernal stink of smoke for'a'd, sir," he said respectfully.

The two of them crossed the bridge deck and went down upon the long forward deck. A glance assured Edwards that neither hatch had been tampered with. He turned and looked up at the watch officer pacing the bridge. That individual seemed unconscious of anything out of the ordinary.

"Where can the mate have gone to?" Edwards muttered, and proceeded to test the temperature of the deck plating at various points and to sniff at the ventilators. He was rewarded by a mere taint in the air that rose from one leading to number-two hold.

"Bos'n," he said, "have a smell of this."

"There's a tang o' fire in it, sir," the bos'n said quietly.

The captain thought quickly. "That lower hold is full of glue and baled rags," he said. "Sweet lot to get afire."

Leaving the bos'n with directions to call all hands and rig hoses along the deck to both hatches, Edwards hastened away and found the mate on the bridge.

"I'd order you to take charge below," the captain told him meaningly, "if I didn't think it best to handle this affair myself. You stop up here."

Chief Malcolmson listened while Edwards detailed his orders and nodded.

"The main thing is not to have to pump any water into the hold," the captain finished. "Steam is our stand-by."

Daylight found the *Dark Star* plodding along at reduced speed. The steam from the hoses wreathed her forepart and eddied to leeward. So far no smoke had showed itself. The fire, if fire there was, seemed to be smoldering far down in the hold, and was held in check by the volumes of steam poured in through several openings in the deck plates. At noon Edwards decided he had done enough and stopped the steam. At dark, with the Japanese coast a bare two days away he congratulated himself on having successfully beaten this last misfortune. But at ten that night the officer of the watch saw a burst of flaming gas puff from a ventilator and in twenty minutes thereafter the forward portion of the *Dark Star* was emitting huge clouds of strangling smoke mingled with acrid fumes that stifled any who breathed them.

"This is a case of drown out the fire," Edwards told the chief when steam had failed to make any impression.

When the pumps were started and the water flowing into the hold, Mr. Greening was called into consultation with the engineer. The captain explained briefly that at the rate the hold was being filled the limit of safety would soon be reached. "And if the fire isn't reached and put out by that time, we'll have to change our tactics. Mister, suppose you tell us what you think."

The mate perceived from the tone in which this was said that he was on trial. A glance at the chief's face gave him no hope of sympathy in that quarter. He mumbled inarticulately and was silent.

"You're uncommonly helpful," Edwards remarked scornfully and drew Malcolmson aside. Later they went below, leaving Greening to share the watch with Ticknor, the second mate. When they came back in an hour, very grimy and solemn, Ticknor confessed he had no notion where the chief officer was.

"He said he was going aft to have a looksee, sir," he said.

Edwards sent a quartermaster to Greening's room. The report was that he wasn't there.

"Find him, man!" Edwards said testily. "He's aboard the steamer!"

It was soon gathered that the mate was not. In company with a quartermaster he had lowered a quarter boat and made off.

The chief engineer had no opinion to give. The wireless operator helped to clear the mystery. On being summoned he said he had heard the Inter-ocean steamship *Vulcan* talking and asking for news of the *Dark Star*.

"I asked Mr. Greening about it while you were busy, sir," said the boy. "He asked me several questions. I told him that the *Vulcan* was about thirty miles west of us, so far as I could figure."

"That settles it," Edwards fumed. "He's gone off on a chance of picking the *Vulcan* up. If he reaches her—and ten to one he will—old Timms, her skipper, will scent salvage and be down on us before noon. I know Timms. I sailed with him. Honest enough and a good seaman, but he sleeps only to dream of salvage."

"Do you think we can make the Straits, sir?" Malcolmson inquired calmly.

"I'm not going to try," Edwards answered heatedly. "Look at the crew we've got! Just let that fire get ahead of us and another ship come up and you'll see 'em all jump for the boats. They'd leave us helpless, chief."

The engineer stared thoughtfully at the stars. "What *are* you going to do?" he asked presently.

"Head back to the eastward, chief."

"And the fire?"

"We'll fight it out alone, without any ships standing by to tempt the crew away," Edwards returned firmly. "I know perfectly well that Greening has taken plenty of rockets with him. He'll be signaling the *Vulcan* before dawn with 'em. He'll be picked up, tell a hard-luck story, and have her down on us in no time. I'm going to stump Greening yet. We won't be here!"

The chief engineer studied the matter solemnly, his aged face showing white and careworn in the vague light under the stars. In the end he sighed and went down to his machines. He would, his last, resigned glance showed, stick with the *Dark Star*. Edwards went to the bridge. A few moments later the steamer made a wide circle in the smoothly heaving sea and headed back into the Pacific. Two hours later the pumps ceased to throw water into the hold that was afire. The engines picked up their speed and drove the steamer on more powerfully.

In the morning Malcolmson came up from his engines and joined the wide-eyed captain on the bridge. The fumes and vapor of the

burning cargo still hung over the ship. The hose lines still ran along the deck like great serpents. A few hands slept soundly on the hard plates, their sooty faces upturned to the sky.

"The fire?" the chief murmured huskily.

"Still going, chief."

"And now?"

"I'm making for the lower Kuriles," Edwards rasped. "I see there's a kind of harbor on one of the islands. Us for that. Then we'll fight this fire to a finish."

The *Dark Star* rose on a long swell and trembled violently. Then she lay far over and hung there for a breathless moment. When she righted herself slowly both men gasped.

"You've not got any too much time, sir," Malcolmson muttered.

"It's the water in number-two hold."

"Pump it out?"

"Not by a good deal. That would give the fire a chance to eat downward and toward the wings. Now it's confined to the central part and the upper tiers—where it was set." Edwards' voice broke wrathfully.

"When shall we sight your island?"

"To-morrow morning."

The chief engineer allowed himself a dogmatic statement, as if he could not longer contain himself: "We shall never arrive."

To give weight to his prophecy the *Dark Star* again lurched sickeningly, hung a while, and then recovered herself.

With one swing Edwards was down the bridge and at the wheel. The displaced quartermaster glanced at him with a scared grimace. But in a little he quietly went and stood lookout in the wing of the bridge. The captain could steer. The *Dark Star* no longer lurched. She steamed steadily on, as if held to her course by some new and powerful force. Even when the sea got up and the wind rose the steamer showed no more signs of instability.

At the end of twenty-four hours Tom Edwards let the spokes of the big wheel slip from his stiff fingers. From the forecastle head Mr. Ticknor looked up at him, waiting for the signal to let go the anchor, now made fast to a wire cable faked on the deck in lieu of the cable acting as ballast in the bunker below. In a croak the command went out, the carpenter knocked away the stopper, and the great mass of iron thundered into the smooth waters of the landlocked bay which the *Dark Star* had just entered. The engine-room gongs clanged and boomed, the deck trembled to the hurried pull and thrust of the engines, and the ship slowly drew back from her anchor. When she was at rest Edwards staggered to the bridge ladder. The old bos'n met him and caught him in his strong arms.

In a stifled voice the exhausted captain gave his commands to warp the steamer in broadside to the steep beach and to off hatches and start breaking the cargo out of the burning hold.

"I understand, sir," Padger answered briskly. "Leave it to me, sir."

Edwards gathered his strength for a last word. "And if any vessel shows her nose around that point, call me. Call me, anyway, in an hour."

"In an hour, sir," said the old man, and straightened up and strode off bellowing in true deep-sea style for all hands. His summons was answered by the hasty tramp of feet and cries of "All ha-a-a-nds!" resounding into the farthest parts of the vessel. Suddenly the trampling ceased, the cries died away. Followed a silence broken only by little jets of noise that rose and fell whimperingly. The *Dark Star* leaned over like an outworn creature until her masts lay out over the surface of the bay like long antennæ. When she ceased to careen there rose a babble of voices, of shouts, of curses. It was stilled by the booming tones of the bos'n, echoing across the bay in regular waves of melodious sound, summoning slackers to work, to toil, to the enormous and inevitable labor of saving their ship. Hearing it the timorous grew brisk, the careless defiant of fate. They assumed to despise the menace of the *Dark Star's* perilous list, to rejoice in the very nearness of the danger. They started to work, climbing up her sloping decks, clinging to stanchions, to stays, to ventilator cowls, to ringbolts, laughing and boasting of what they were about to do.

Sprawled in his cabin Edwards slept, unconscious of his vessel's plight. And far below, supine against the steel wall of his engine room Malcolmson reclined weakly, open-eyed, grimly staring into the engines that leaned far over him, still and motionless, holding over him their tremendous and futile threat.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

The Quirt

By B. M. Bower

Author of "The Sky Rider," "Chip of the Flying U," Etc.

(*A Three-Part Story—Part III*)

CHAPTER XVII.

FOR a time the trail led toward Whisper. Then it turned away and seemed about to end abruptly on a flat outcropping of rock two miles from Whisper Camp. Lone frowned and stared at the ground, and Swan spoke sharply to Jack, who was nosing back and forth, at fault if ever a dog was. But presently he took up the scent and led them down a barren slope and into grassy ground where a bunch of horses grazed contentedly. Jack singled out one and ran toward it silently, as he had done all his trailing that morning. The horse looked up, stared and went galloping down the little valley, stampeding the others with him.

"That's about where I thought we'd wind up—in a saddle bunch," Lone observed disgustedly. "If I had the evidence you're carrying in your pocket, Swan, I'd put that darn dog on the scent of the man, not the horse."

"The man I've got," Swan retorted. "I don't have to trail him."

"Well, now, you *think* you've got him. Here's good, level ground—I couldn't get outa sight in less than ten minutes, afoot. Let me walk out a ways, and you see if that handkerchief's mine. Oh, search me all you want to, first," he added when he read the suspicion in Swan's eyes. "Make yourself safe as yuh please, but give me a fair show. You've made up your mind I'm the killer, and you've been fitting the evidence to me—or trying to."

"It fits," Swan pointed out dryly.

"You see if it does. The dog'll tell you all about it in about two minutes if you give him a chance."

Swan looked at him. "Yack don't lie. By golly I raised that dog to trail, and he *trails,* you bet! He's cocker spaniel and bloodhound, and he knows things, that dog. All right, Lone, you walk over to that black rock and set down. If you think you frame something, maybe, I pack a dead man to the Quirt again."

"You can, for all me," Lone replied quietly. "I'd about as soon go that way as the way I am now."

Swan watched him until he was seated on the rock as directed, his manacled hands resting on his knees, his face turned toward the horses. Then Swan took the blue handkerchief from his pocket, called Jack to him, and muttered something in Swedish while the dog sniffed at the cloth. "Find him, Yack," said Swan, standing straight again.

Jack went sniffing obediently in wide circles, crossing unconcernedly Lone's footprints while he trotted back and forth. He hesitated once on the trail of the horse he had followed, stopped and looked at Swan inquiringly, and whined. Swan whistled the dog to him with a peculiar, birdlike note, and called to Lone.

"You come back, Lone, and let Yack take a damn good smell of you. By golly, if that dog lies to me this time I lick him good!"

Lone came back grinning a little. "All right, now maybe you'll listen to reason. I ain't the kind to tell all I know and some besides, Swan. I've been a Sawtooth man, and a fellow kinda hates to throw down his outfit deliberate. But they're going too strong for any white man to stand for. I quit them when they tried to get Brit Hunter. I don't *know* so much, Swan, but I'm pretty good at guessing. So if you'll come with me to Whisper, your dog may show yuh who owns that handkerchief. If he don't, then I'm making a mistake and I'd like to be set right."

"Somebody rode that horse," Swan meditated aloud. "Yack don't make a mistake like that, and I don't think I'm blind. Where's the man that was on the horse? What you think, Lone?"

"Me? I think there was another horse somewhere close to that outcropping, tied to a bush, maybe. I think the man you're after

changed horses there, just on a chance that somebody might trail him from the road. You put your dog on the trail of that one particular horse, and he showed yuh where it was feeding with the bunch. It looks to me like it was turned loose, back there, and come on alone. Your man went to Whisper —I'll bank money on that. Anyway, your dog'll know if he's been there."

Swan thought it over, his eyes moving here and there to every hint of movement between the sky line and himself. Suddenly he turned to Lone, his face flushing with honest shame:

"Loney, take a damn Swede and give him something he believes, and you could pull his teeth before you pull that notion from his thick head. You acted funny, that day Fred Thurman was killed, and you gave yourself away at the stable when I showed you that saddle. So I think you're the killer, and I keep on thinking that, and I've been trying to catch you with evidence. I'm a Swede, all right! Squarehead. Built of wood two inches thick. Loney, you kick me good. You don't have time to ride over here, get some other horse and ride back to the Quirt after Frank was killed. You got there before I did, last night. We know Frank was dead not much more than one hour when we get him to the bunk house. Yack, he gives you a good alibi."

They returned to the rocky hillside where the trail had been covered, and searched here and there for the tracks of another horse; found the trail and followed it easily enough to Whisper. Swan put Jack once more on the scent of the handkerchief, and if actions meant anything, Jack proved conclusively that he found the Whisper camp reeking with the scent.

"We may as well eat," Swan suggested. "We'll get him, by golly, but we don't have to starve ourselves."

"He wouldn't know we're after him," Lone agreed. "He'll stick around so as not to raise suspicion. And he might come back, most any time. If he does, we'll say I'm out with you after coyotes, and we stopped here for a meal. That's good enough to satisfy him—till you get the drop on him. But I want to tell yuh, Swan, you can't take Al Woodruff as easy as you took me. And you couldn't have taken me so easy if I'd been the man you wanted. Al would kill you as easy as you kill coyotes. Give him a reason and you won't need to give him a chance along with it. He'll find the chance himself."

Swan wanted to take Al Woodruff back with him in irons. He wanted to confront the coroner with the evidence he had found, and the testimony which Lone could give.

He discussed with Lone the possibility of making Al talk—the chance of his implicating the Sawtooth. Lone did not hope for much, and said so.

"If Al was a talker he wouldn't be holding the job he's got," Lone argued. "Don't get the wrong idea again, Swan. Yuh may pin this on to Al, but that won't let the Sawtooth in. The Sawtooth's too slick for that. They'd be more likely to make up a lynching party right in the outfit and hang Al as an example, than they would try to shield him. He's played a lone hand, Swan, right from the start, unless I'm badly mistaken. The Sawtooth's paid him for playing it, that's all."

"Warfield, he's the man I want," Swan confided. "It's for more than killing these men. It goes into politics, Loney, and it goes deep. He's bad for the government. Getting Warfield for having men killed is getting Warfield without telling secrets of politics. Warfield, he's a smart man, by golly. He knows some one is after him in politics, but he don't know some one is after him at home. So the big Swede has got to be smart enough to get the evidence against him for killing."

"Well, I wish yuh luck, Swan, but I can't say you're going at it right. Al won't talk, I tell yuh."

Swan did not believe that. He waited another hour, and made a mental inventory of everything in camp while he waited. Then, chiefly because Lone's impatience finally influenced him, he set out to see where Al had gone.

According to Jack, Al had gone to the corral. From there they put Jack on the freshest hoofprints leaving the place, and were led here and there in an apparently aimless journey to nowhere until, after Jack had been at fault in another rock patch, the trail took them straight away to the ridge overlooking the Quirt Ranch. The two men looked at one another.

"That's like Al," Lone commented dryly. "Coyotes are foolish alongside him, and you'll find it out. I'll bet he's been watching this place since daybreak."

"Where he goes Yack will follow," Swan

grinned cheerfully. "And I follow Yack. We'll get him, Lone. That dog, he never quits till I say quit."

"Well, I'm going down to the house first. I want to see what the boss and Hawkins have got to say about this last 'accident.' Better come on down, Swan. You might pick up something. They're heading for the ranch, all right. Going to make a play at being neighborly, I reckon."

"You bet I want to see Warfield," Swan assented rather eagerly, and called Jack, who had nosed around the spot where Al had waited so long, and was now trotting along the ridge on the next stage of Al's journey.

They reached the gate in time to meet Senator Warfield and Hawkins face to face. Hawkins gave Lone a quick, questioning look and nodded carelessly to Swan. Warfield, having a delicate errand to perform and knowing how much depended upon first impressions, pulled up eagerly when he recognized Lone.

"Has the girl arrived safely, Lone?" he asked anxiously.

"What girl?" Lone looked at him noncommittally.

"Miss—ah—Hunter. Have you been away, all the forenoon? The girl came to the ranch in such a condition that I was afraid she might do herself or some one else an injury. Has she been mentally unbalanced for long?"

"If you mean Lorraine Hunter, she was all right last time I saw her, and that was last night." Lone's eyes narrowed a little as he watched the two. "You say she went to the Sawtooth?"

Senator Warfield glanced at him impatiently. "Is there any truth in her declaring that Frank Johnson is dead? She seemed to have had a shock of some kind. She was raving crazy, and in her rambling talk she said something about Frank Johnson having died last night."

Lone glanced back as he led the way through the gate which Swan was holding open. "He didn't die—he got killed last night," he corrected.

"Killed! And how did that happen? It was impossible to get two coherent sentences out of the girl." Senator Warfield rode through just behind Lone, and reined close, lowering his voice. "No use in letting this get out," he said confidentially. "It may be that the girl's dementia is some curable nervous disorder, and you know what an injustice it would be if it became noised around that the girl is crazy. How much English does that Swede know?"

"Not any more than he needs to get along on," Lone answered, instinctively on guard. "He's all right—just a good-natured kinda cuss that wouldn't harm anybody."

He glanced uneasily at the house, hoping that Lorraine was safe inside, yet fearing that she would not be safe anywhere. Sane or insane, she was in danger if Senator Warfield considered her of sufficient importance to bring him out on horseback to the Quirt Ranch. Lone knew how seldom the owner of the Sawtooth rode on horseback since he had high-powered cars to carry him in soft comfort.

"I'll go see if she's home," Lone explained, and reined John Doe toward the house.

"I'll go with you," Senator Warfield offered suavely, keeping alongside. "Frank Johnson was killed, you say? How did it happen?"

"Fell off his wagon and broke his neck," Lone told him laconically. "Brit's pretty sick yet; I don't guess you'd better go inside. There's been a lot of excitement already for the old man. He only sees folks he's used to having around."

With that he dismounted and went into the house, leaving Senator Warfield without an excuse for following. Swan and Hawkins came up and waited with him, and Jim opened the door of the bunk house and looked out at them without showing enough interest to come forward and speak to them.

In a few minutes Lone returned, to find Senator Warfield trying to glean information from Swan, who seemed willing enough to give it if only he could find enough English words to form a complete sentence. Swan, then, had availed himself of Lone's belittlement of him, and was living down to it. But Lone gave him scant attention just then.

"She hasn't come back. Brit's worked himself up into a fever, and I didn't dare tell him she wasn't with me. I said she's all tired out and sick and wanted to stay up by the spring a while, where it's cool. I said she was with me, and the sun was too much for her, and she sent him word that Jim would take care of him a while longer. So you better move down this way, or he'll hear us talking and want to know what's up."

"You're sure she isn't here?" Senator Warfield's voice held suspicion.

"You can ask Jim, over here. He's been

on hand right along. And if you can't take his word for it, you can go look in the shack —but in that case Brit's liable to take a shot at yuh, senator. He's on the warpath right, and he's got his gun right handy."

"It is not necessary to search the cabin," Senator Warfield answered stiffly. "Unless she is in a stupor we'd have heard her yelling long ago. The girl was a raving maniac when she appeared at the Sawtooth. It's for her good that I'm thinking."

Jim stepped out of the doorway and came slowly toward them, eying the two from the Sawtooth curiously while he chewed tobacco. His hands rested on his hips, his thumbs hooked inside his overalls; a gawky pose that fitted well his colorless personality —and left his right hand close to his six-shooter.

"Cor'ner comin'?" he asked.

Senator Warfield said that he felt sure the coroner would be prompt, and then questioned Jim artfully about "Miss Hunter."

" 'Raine? She went fer a ride. I loaned her my horse, and she ain't back yet. I told her to take a good long ride and settle her nerves. She acted kinda edgy."

"You noticed, then, that she was not quite —herself?" Senator Warfield used his friendly, confidential tone on Jim.

"We-ell—yes, I did. I thought a ride would do her good, mebby. She's been sticking here on the job purty close. And Frank getting killed kinda upset her, I guess."

"That's it—that's what I was saying. Disordered nerves, which rest and proper medical care will soon remedy." He looked at Lone. "Her horse was worn out when she reached the ranch. Does she know this country well? She started this way, and she should have been here some time ago. We thought it best to ride after her, but there was some delay in getting started. Hawkins' horse broke away and gave us some trouble catching him, so the girl had quite a start. But with her horse fagged as it was, we had no idea that we would fail to get even a sight of her. She may have wandered off on some other trail, in which case her life as well as her reason is in danger."

Lone did not answer at once. It had occurred to him that Senator Warfield knew where Lorraine was at that minute, and that he might be showing this concern for the effect it would have on his hearers. He looked at him speculatively.

"Do you think we ought to get out and hunt for her?" he asked.

"I certainly think some one ought to. We can't let her wander around the country in that condition. If she is not here, she is somewhere in the hills, and she should be found."

"She sure ain't here," Jim asserted convincingly. "I been watching for the last two hours, expecting every minute she'd show up. I'd 'a' been kinda oneasy, myself, but Snake's dead gentle and she's a purty fair rider fer a girl."

"Then we'll have to find her. Lone, can you come and help?"

"The Swede and me'll both help," Lone volunteered. "Jim and Sorry can wait here for the coroner. We ought to find her without any trouble, much. Swan, I'll get you that tobacco first, and see if Brit needs anything."

He started to the house, and Swan followed him aimlessly, his long strides bringing him close to Lone before they reached the door.

"What do you make of this new play?" Lone muttered cautiously when he saw Swan's shadow move close to his own.

"By golly, it's something funny about it. I'm taking Al's trail with Yack. You fix it." And he added whimsically, "Not so much tobacco, Lone. I don't eat it or smoke it ever in my life."

His voice was very Swedish, which was fortunate, because Senator Warfield appeared softly behind him, and went into the house. Swan was startled, but he hadn't much time to worry over the possibility of having been overheard. Brit's voice rose in a furious denunciation of Bill Warfield, punctuated by two shots and followed almost immediately by the senator.

"My God, the whole family's crazy!" Warfield exclaimed when he had reached the safety of the open air. "You're right, Lone. I thought I'd be neighborly enough to ask what I could do for him, and he tried to kill me!"

Lone merely grunted, and gave Swan the tobacco.

CHAPTER XVIII.

There was no opportunity for further conference. Senator Warfield showed no especial interest in Swan, and the Swede was permitted without comment to take his dog and strike off up the ridge. Jim and Sorry

were sent to look after Brit, who was still shouting vain threats against the Sawtooth, and the other three men rode away together. Warfield did not suggest separating, which Lone had expected him to do, since one man on a trail was as good as three in a search of this kind.

He was still inclined to doubt the whole story. He did not believe that Lorraine had been to the Sawtooth, nor that she had raved insanely about anything. She had probably gone off by herself to cry and to worry over her troubles—hurt, perhaps, because Lone had left the ranch that morning without a word with her first.

He believed the story of her being insane had been carefully planned, and that Warfield had perhaps ridden over in the hope that they would find her alone; though with Frank dead on the ranch that would be unlikely. But to offset that, Lone's reason told him that Warfield had probably not known that Frank was dead. That had been news to him—or had it? He tried to remember whether Warfield had mentioned it first, and could not. Too many disturbing emotions had held him lately; Lone was beginning to feel the need of a long, quiet pondering over his problems. He did not feel sure of anything except the fact that the Quirt was like a drowning man struggling vainly against the whirlpool that is sucking him slowly under.

One thing he knew, and that was his determination to stay with these two of the Sawtooth until he had some definite information; until he saw Lorraine or knew that she was safe from them. Like a weight pressing harder and harder until one is crushed beneath it, their talk of Lorraine's insanity forced fear into his soul.

They could do just what they had talked of doing. He himself had placed that weapon in their hands when he took her to the Sawtooth delirious, and told of wilder words and actions. Hawkins and his wife would swear away her sanity if they were told to do it, and there were witnesses in plenty who had heard him call her crazy, that first morning.

They could do it—they could have her committed to an asylum, or, at least, to a sanitarium. He did not underestimate the influence of Senator Warfield. And what could the Quirt do to prevent the outrage? Frank Johnson was dead, Brit was out of the fight for the time being, Jim and Sorry were the doggedly faithful sort who must have a leader before they can be counted upon to do much.

Swan—Lone lifted his head and glanced toward the ridge when he thought of Swan. There, indeed, he might hope for help. But Swan was out here, away from reënforcements. He was trailing Al Woodruff, and when he found him, that might be the end of Swan. If not, Warfield could hurry Lorraine away before Swan could act in the matter. A whimsical thought of Swan's telepathic miracle crossed his mind and was dismissed as an unseemly bit of foolery in a matter so grave as Lorraine's safety. And yet—the doctor *had* received a message that he was wanted at the Quirt, and he had arrived before his patient. There was no getting around that, however impossible it might be. No one could have foreseen Brit's accident; no one save the man who had prepared it for him, and he would be the last person to call for help.

"We followed the girl's horse tracks almost to Thurman's place, and lost the trail there." Warfield turned in the saddle to look at Lone riding behind him. "We made no particular effort to trace her from there, because we were sure she would come on home. I'm going back that far and we'll pick up the trail, unless we find her at the ranch. She may have hidden herself away. You can't," he added, "be sure of anything where a demented person is concerned. They never act according to logic or reason, and it is impossible to make any deductions as to their probable movements."

Lone nodded, not daring to trust his tongue with speech just then. If he were later to protect Lorraine, he knew that he must not defend her now.

"Hawkins told me she had some sort of hallucination that she had seen a man killed at Rock City, when she was wandering around in that storm," Warfield went on in a careless, gossipy tone. "Just what was that about, Lone? You're the one who found her and took her to the ranch, I believe. She somehow mixed her delusion up with Fred Thurman, didn't she?"

Lone made a swift decision. He was afraid to appear to hesitate, so he laughed his quiet little chuckle while he scrambled mentally for a plausible lie.

"I don't know as she done that, quite," he drawled humorously. "She was out of her head, all right, and talking wild, but I laid

it to her being sick and scared. She said a man was shot, and that she saw it happen. And right on top of that she said she didn't think they ought to stage a murder and a thunderstorm in the same scene, and thought they ought to save the thunder and lightning for the murderer to make his get-away by. She used to work for the moving pictures, and she was going on about some wild-West picture she thought she was acting a part in.

"Afterward I told her what she'd been saying and she seemed to kinda remember it, like a bad dream she'd had. She told me she thought the villain in one of the plays she acted in, had pulled off a stage murder in them rocks. We figured it out together that the first crack of thunder had sounded like shooting, and that's what started her off. She hadn't ever been in a real thunderstorm before, and she's scared of them. I know that one we had the other day like to of scared her into hysterics. I laughed at her and joshed her out of it."

"Didn't she ever say anything about Fred Thurman, then?" Warfield persisted.

"Not to me, she didn't. Fred was dragged that night, and if she heard about a man being killed during that same storm, she might have said something about it. She might have wondered if that was what she saw. I don't know. She's pretty sensible—when she ain't crazy."

Warfield turned his horse, as if by accident, so that he was brought face to face with Lone. His eyes searched Lone's face pitilessly.

"Lone, you know how ugly a story can grow if it's left alone. Do *you* believe that girl actually saw a man shot—or do you think she was crazy?"

Lone met Warfield's eyes fairly. "I think she was plumb out of her head," he answered. And he added with just the right degree of hesitation: "I don't think she's what you'd call right crazy, Mr. Warfield. Lots of folks go outa their heads and talk crazy when they get a touch of fever, and they get over it again."

"Let's have a fair understanding," Warfield insisted. "Do you think I am justified in the course I am taking, or don't you?"

"Hunting her up? Sure, I do! If you and Hawkins rode on home, I'd keep on hunting till I located her. If she's been raving around like you say, she's in no shape to be riding these hills alone. She's got to be taken care of."

Warfield gave him another sharp scrutiny and rode on. "I always prefer to deal in the open with every one," he averred. "It may not be my affair, strictly speaking. The Quirt and the Sawtooth aren't very intimate. But the Quirt's having trouble enough to warrant any one in lending a hand; and common humanity demands that I take charge of the girl until she is herself again."

"I don't know as any one would question that," Lone assented, and ground his teeth afterward because he must yield even the appearance of approval. He knew that Warfield must feel himself in rather a desperate position, else he would never trouble to make his motives so clear to one of his men. Indeed, Warfield had protested too much and too often his unselfishness in the matter to have deceived the dullest man who owned the slightest suspicion of him. Lone could have smiled at the sight of Senator Warfield betraying himself so, had smiling been possible to him then.

He dropped behind the two at the first rough bit of trail, and stealthily tested the hanging of his six-shooter, which he might need in a hurry. Those two men would never lay their hands on Lorraine Hunter while he lived to prevent it. He did not swear it to himself—he had no need.

They rode on to Fred Thurman's ranch, dismounted at Warfield's suggestion—which amounted to a command—and began a careful search of the premises. If Warfield had felt any doubt of Lone's loyalty he appeared to have dismissed it from his mind, for he sent Lone to the stable to search there, while he and Hawkins went into the house. Lone guessed that the two felt the need of a private conference after their visit to the Quirt, but he could see no way to slip unobserved to the house and eavesdrop, so he looked perfunctorily through all the sheds and around the depleted haystacks—wherever a person could find a hiding place. He was letting himself down through the manhole in the stable loft when Swan's voice, lowered almost to a whisper, startled him.

"What the hell!" Lone ejaculated under his breath. "I thought you were on another trail."

"That trail leads here, Lone. Did you find 'Raine yet?"

"Not a sign of her. Swan, I don't know what to make of it. I did think them two were stalling. I thought they either hadn't

seen her at all, or had got hold of her and were trying to square themselves on the insanity dodge. But if they know where she is, they're acting damn queer, Swan. They *want* her. They haven't got her yet."

"They're in the house," Swan reassured Lone. "I heard them walking. You don't think they've got her there, Lone?"

"If they have," gritted Lone, "they made the biggest blunder of their lives bringing me over here. No, I could see they wanted to get off by themselves and hold a powwow. They expected she'd be at the Quirt."

"I think Al Woodruff, he's maybe got her, then," Swan declared after studying the matter briefly. "All the way he follows the trail over here, Lone. I could see you sometimes riding along. He was keeping hid from the trail—I think because 'Raine was riding along, this morning, and he's following. The tracks are that old."

"They said they had trailed 'Raine this far, coming from the Sawtooth," Lone told him worriedly. "What do you think Al would want——"

"Don't she see him shoot Fred Thurman? By golly, I'm scared for that girl, Loney!"

Lone stared at him. "He wouldn't dare!"

"A coward is a brave man when you scare him bad enough," Swan stated flatly. "I'm careful always when I corner a coward."

"Al ain't a coward. You've got him wrong."

"Maybe, but he kills like a coward would kill, and he's scared he will be caught. Warfield, he's scared, too. You watch him, Lone.

"Now I tell you what I do. Yack, he picks up the trail from here to where you can follow easy. We know two places where he didn't go with her, and from here is two more trails he could take. But one goes to the main road and he don't take that one, I bet you. I think he takes that girl up Spirit Cañon, maybe. It's woods and wild country in a few miles, and plenty of places to hide, and good chances for getting out over the top of the divide.

"I'm going to my cabin, and you don't say anything when I leave. Warfield, he don't want 'the damn Swede' hanging around. So you go with them, Loney. This is to what you call a show-down."

"We'll want the dog," Lone told him, but Swan shook his head. Hawkins and Warfield had come from the house and were approaching the stable. Swan looked at Lone, and Lone went forward to meet them.

"The Swede followed along on the ridge, and he didn't see anything," he volunteered before Warfield could question him. "We might put his dog on the trail and see which way she went from here."

Warfield thought that a good idea. He was so sure that Lorraine must be somewhere within a mile or two of the place that he seemed to think the search was practically over when Jack, nosing out the trail of Al Woodruff, went trotting toward Spirit Cañon.

"Took the wrong turn after she left the corrals here," Warfield commented relievedly. "She wouldn't get far, up this way."

"There's the track of two horses," Hawkins said abruptly. "That there is the girl's horse, all right—there's a hind shoe missing. We saw where her horse had cast a shoe, coming over Juniper Ridge. But there's another horse track."

Lone bit his lip. It was the other horse that Jack had been trailing so long. "There was a loose horse hanging around Thurman's place," he said casually. "It's him, tagging along, I reckon."

"Oh," said Hawkins. "That accounts for it."

CHAPTER XIX.

Past the field where the horses were grazing, and up the cañon on the side toward Sky-line Meadow, that lay on a shoulder of Bear Top, the dog nosed unfalteringly along the trail. Now and then he was balked when the hoofprints led him to the bank of Granite Creek, but not for long. Jack appeared to understand why his trailing was interrupted, and sniffed the bank until he picked up the scent again.

"Wonder if she changed off and rode that loose horse," Hawkins said once, when the tracks were plain in the soft soil of the creek bank. "She might, and led that horse she was on."

"She wouldn't know enough. She's a city girl," Lone replied, his heart heavy with fear for Lorraine.

"Well, she ain't far off then," Hawkins comforted himself. "Her horse acted about played out when she hit the ranch. She had him wet from his ears to his tail, and he was breathin' like that Ford at the ranch.

If that's a sample of her riding, she ain't far off."

"Crazy—to ride up here. Keep your eyes open, boys. We must find her, whatever we do." Warfield gazed apprehensively at the rugged steeps on either hand, and at the timber line above them. "From here on she couldn't turn back without meeting us —if I remember this country correctly. Could she, Hawkins?"

"Not unless she turned off, up here a mile or two, into that gulch that heads into Sky Line," said Hawkins. "There's a stock trail part way down from the top where it swings off from the divide to Wilder Creek."

Swan, walking just behind Hawkins, moved up a pace.

"I could go to Sky Line with Yack, and I could come down by those trail," he suggested diffidently, Swedishly, yet with a certain compelling confidence. "What you think?"

"I think that's a damned good idea for a squarehead," Hawkins told him, and repeated it to Warfield who was riding ahead.

"Why, yes. We don't need the dog, nor the man, either. Go up to the head of the gulch, and keep your eyes open, Swan. We'll meet you up here. You know the girl, don't you?"

"Yas, I know her pretty good."

"Well, don't frighten her. Don't let her see that you think anything is wrong—and don't say anything about us. We made the mistake of discussing her condition within her hearing, and it is possible that she understood enough of what we were saying to take alarm. You understand? Don't tell girl she's crazy." He tapped his head to make his meaning plainer. "Don't tell girl we're looking for her. You understand?"

"Yas, I know English purty good I don't tell too mooch" His cheerful smile brought a faint response from Senator Warfield At Lone he did not look at all. "I go quick. I'm good climber like a sheep," he boasted, and whistling to Jack he began working his way up a rough, brush-scattered ledge to the slope above

Lone watched him miserably, wishing that Swan was not quite so matter of fact in his man chasing. If Al Woodruff for some reason which Lone could not fathom had taken Lorraine and forced her to go with him into the wilderness, Warfield and Hawkins would be his allies the moment they came up with him. Lone was no coward, but neither was he a fool. Hawkins had never distinguished himself as a fighter, but Lone had gleaned here and there a great deal of information about Senator Warfield in the old days when he had been plain Bill. When Lorraine and Al were overtaken, then Lone would need to show the stuff that was in him. He only hoped he would have time, and that luck would be with him.

He looked up and saw that already Swan was halfway up the cañon's steep side, making his way through the brush with more speed than Lone could have shown on foot in the open, unless he ran. The sight heartened Lone a little. Swan might have some plan of his own—an ambush, possibly. If he would only keep along within rifle shot, and remain hidden, he would show real brains, Lone thought. But Swan, when Lone looked up again, was climbing straight away from the little searching party; and even though he seemed tireless on foot he could not perform miracles.

Swan, however, was not troubling himself over what Lone would think, or even what Warfield was thinking. Contrary to Lone's idea of him, Swan was tired, and he was thinking a great deal about Lorraine, and very little about Al Woodruff, except as Al was concerned with Lorraine's welfare.

As he forged up the slope and across the ridge lip of the cañon, his one immediate object was speed. Up the cañon and over the divide on the west shoulder of Bear Top was a trail to the open country beyond. It was perfectly passable, as Swan knew; he had packed in by that trail when he located his homestead on Bear Top. That is why he had his cabin up and was living in it before the Sawtooth discovered his presence.

Al, he believed, was making for Bear Top Pass. Once down the other side he would find friends to lend him fresh horses. Swan had learned something of these friends of the Sawtooth, and he could guess pretty accurately how far some of them would go in their service. Fresh horses for all, food —perhaps even a cabin where he could hide Lorraine away—were to be expected from any one of them, once Al was over the divide.

Swan glanced up at the sun, saw that it was dropping to late afternoon and started at a long, loose-jointed trot across the mountain meadow called Sky Line. A few pines, with scattered clumps of juniper and fir, dotted the long, irregular stretch of grassland which formed the meadow. Range cat-

tle were feeding here and there, so wild they lifted heads to stare at the man and dog, then came trotting forward, their curiosity unabated by the fact that they had seen these two before.

The full length of Sky-line Meadow he ran, jumping the small beginning of Wilder Creek with one great leap that scarcely interrupted the beautiful rhythm of his stride. At the far end of the clearing, snuggled between two great pines that reached high into the blue, his squatty cabin showed red-brown against the precipitous shoulder of Bear Top peak, covered thick with brush and scraggy timber whipped incessantly by the wind that blew over the mountain's crest.

At the door Swan stopped and examined the crude fastening of the door; made himself certain, by private marks of his own, that none had entered in his absence, and went in with a great sigh of satisfaction. It was still broad daylight, though the sun's rays slanted in through the window; but Swan lighted a lantern that hung on a nail behind the door, carried it across the neat little room and set it down on the floor beside the usual pioneer cupboard made simply of clean boxes nailed bottom against the wall. Swan had furnished a few extra frills to his cupboard, for the ends of the boxes were fastened to hewn slabs standing upright and just clearing the floor. Near the upper shelf a row of nails held Swan's coffee cups—four of them, thick and white, such as cheap restaurants use.

Swan hooked a finger over the nail that held a cracked cup, and glanced over his shoulder at Jack sitting in the doorway with his keen nose to the world.

"You watch out, now, Yack. I shall talk to my mother with my thoughts," he said, drawing a hand across his forehead and speaking in breathless gasps. "You watch."

For answer Jack thumped his tail on the dirt floor and sniffed the breeze, taking in his overlapping tongue while he did so. He licked his lips, looked over his shoulder at Swan, and draped his pink tongue down over his lower jaw again.

"All right, now I talk," said Swan, and pulled upon the nail in his fingers.

The cupboard swung toward him bodily, end slabs and all. He picked up the lantern, stepped over the log sill and pulled the cupboard door into place again.

Inside the dugout Swan set the lantern on a table, dropped wearily upon a rough bench before it, looked at the battery jars beside him, and opened a compact little field wireless set. His right fingers dropped to the key, and the whining drone of the vibrator rose higher and higher as he tuned up. He reached for his receivers, ducked his head, and adjusted them with one hand and sent a call spitting tiny blue sparks from the key under his fingers.

He waited, repeating the call. His blue eyes clouded with anxiety and he fumbled the adjustments, coaxing the current into perfect action before he called again. Answer came, and Swan bent over the table, listening, his eyes fixed vacantly upon the opposite wall of the dugout. Then, his fingers flexing delicately, swiftly, he sent the message that told how completely his big heart matched the big body:

Send doctor and trained nurse to Quirt Ranch at once. Send men to Bear Top Pass, intercept man with young woman, or come to rescue if he don't cross. Have three men here with evidence to convict if we can save the girl, who is valuable witness. Girl being abducted in fear of what she can tell. They plan to charge her with insanity. Urgent. Hurry. Come ready to fight. S. V.

Swan had a code, but codes require a little time in the composition of a message, and time was the one thing he could not waste. He heard the gist of the message repeated to him, told the man at the other station that lives were at stake, and threw off the current.

CHAPTER XX.

Lorraine had once had a nasty fall from riding downhill at a gallop. She remembered that accident vividly now, and permitted Snake to descend Granite Ridge at a walk, which was fortunate since it gave the horse a chance to recover a little from the strain of the terrific pace at which she had ridden him that morning. At first it had been fighting fury that had impelled her to hurry; now it was fear that drove her homeward, where safety was, and Lone and Swan and that stolid, faithful Jim. She felt that Senator Warfield would never dare to carry out his covert threat, once she reached the Quirt. Nevertheless, the threat haunted her, made her glance often over her shoulder.

At the Thurman ranch, which she was passing with a sickening memory of the night when she and Swan had carried her father there, Al Woodruff rode out suddenly from behind the stable and blocked the trail, his

six-shooter in his hand, his face stony with determination. Lorraine afterward decided that he must have seen or heard her coming down the ridge, and had waited for her there. He smiled when she pulled up Snake with a startled look.

"You're in such a hurry this morning that I thought the only way to get a chance to talk to you was to hold you up," he said, in much the same tone he had used that day at the ranch.

"I don't see why you want to talk to me," Lorraine retorted, not in the least frightened at the gun, which was too much like her movie West to impress her much. But her eyes widened at the look in his face, and she tried to edge away from him without seeming to do so.

Al stopped her by the simple method of reaching out his left hand and catching Snake by the cheek piece of the bridle. "You don't have to see why," he said. "I've been thinking a lot about you lately. I've made up my mind that I've got to have you with me—always. This is kinda sudden, maybe, but that's the way the game runs, sometimes. Now, I want to tell yuh one or two things that's for your own good. One is that I'll have my way or die getting it. Don't be scared—I won't hurt you. But if you try to break away, I'll shoot you, that's all. I'm going to marry you, see, first. Then I'll make love to you afterward, maybe. I ain't asking you if you'll marry me. You're going to do it, or I'll kill you."

Lorraine gazed at him fascinated, too astonished to attempt any move toward escape. Al's hand slipped from the bridle down to the reins, and still holding Snake, still holding the gun muzzle toward her, still looking her straight in the eyes, he threw his right leg over the cantle of his saddle and stepped off his horse.

"Put your other hand on the saddle horn," he directed. "I ain't going to hurt you if you're good."

He twitched his neckerchief off—Lorraine saw that it was untied, and that he must have planned all this—and with it he tied her wrists to the saddle horn. She gave Snake a kick in the ribs, but Al checked the horse's first start, and Snake was too tired to dispute a command to stand still. Al put up his gun, pulled a hunting knife from a little scabbard in his boot, slicked two pairs of saddle strings from Lorraine's saddle, calmly caught and held her foot when she tried to kick him, pushed the foot back into the stirrup, and tied it there with one of the leather strings. Just as if he were engaged in an everyday proceeding, he walked around in front of Snake and tied Lorraine's right foot to its stirrup, then, to prevent her from foolishly throwing herself from the horse and getting hurt, he tied the stirrups together under the horse's belly.

"Now, if you'll be a good girl I'll untie your hands," he said, glancing up into her face. He freed her hands, and Lorraine immediately slapped him in the face and reached for his gun. But Al was too quick for her. He stepped back, picked up Snake's reins, and mounted his own horse. He looked back at her appraisingly, saw her glare of hatred, and grinned at it while he touched his horse with the spurs and rode away, leading Snake behind him.

Lorraine said nothing until Al, riding at a lope, passed the field at the mouth of Spirit Cañon where the blaze-faced roan still grazed with the others. They were feeding along the creek quite close to the fence, and the roan walked toward them. The sight of it stirred Lorraine out of her dumb horror.

"You killed Fred Thurman! I saw you," she cried suddenly.

"Well, you ain't going to holler it all over the country," Al flung back at her over his shoulder. "When you're married to me you'll come mighty close to keeping your mouth shut about it."

"I'll never marry you! You—you fiend! Do you think I'd marry a cold-blooded murderer like you?"

Al turned in the saddle and looked at her intently. "If I'm all that," he told her coolly, "you can figure out about what'll happen to you if you *don't* marry me. If you saw what I done to Fred Thurman, what do you reckon I'd do to *you?*" He looked at her for a minute, shrugged his shoulders, and rode on, crossing the creek and taking a trail which Lorraine did not know. Much of the time they traveled in the water, though it slowed their pace. Where the trail was rocky they took it and made better time.

Snake lagged a little on the up grades, but he was well trained to lead, and gave little trouble. Lorraine thought longingly of Yellowjacket and his stubbornness, and tried to think of some way of escape. She could not believe that fate would permit Al Woodruff to carry out such a plan. Lone would overtake them, perhaps—and then she remem-

bered that Lone would have no means of knowing which way she had gone. If Hawkins and Senator Warfield came after them, her plight would be worse than ever. Still, she decided that she must risk that danger and give Lone a clew.

She dropped a glove beside the trail where it lay in plain sight of any one following them. But presently Al looked over his shoulder, saw that one of her hands was bare, and tied Snake's reins to his saddle and his own horse to a bush, and went back down the trail until he found the glove. He put it into his pocket, came silently up to Lorraine, and pulled off her other glove. Without a word he took her wrists in a firm clasp, tied them together again to the saddle horn, pulled off her tie and her hat and the pins from her hair.

"I guess you don't know me yet," he remarked dryly when he had confiscated every small article which she could let fall as she rode. "I was trying to treat yuh white, but you don't seem to appreciate it. Now you can ride hobbled, young lady."

"Oh, I could *kill* you!" Lorraine whispered between set teeth.

"You mean you'd like to. Well, I ain't going to give you a chance." His eyes rested on her face with a new expression; an awakening desire for her, an admiration for the spirit that would not let her weep and plead with him.

"Say! you ain't going to be a bit hard to marry," he observed, his eyes lighting with what was probably his nearest approach to tenderness. "I kinda wish you liked me, now I've got you."

As they climbed higher she could catch glimpses of the road down which her father had driven almost to his death. She studied Al's back as he rode before her, and wondered if he could really be cold-blooded enough to kill without compunction whomever he was told to kill, whether he had any personal quarrel with his victim or not. Certainly he had had no quarrel with her father, nor with Frank.

It was long past noon, and she was terribly hungry, and very thirsty, but she would not tell Al her wants if she starved. She tried to guess at his plans, and at his motive for taking her away like this. He had no camping outfit, a bulkily rolled slicker forming his only burden. He could not, then, be planning to take her much farther into the wilderness, yet if he did not hide her away, how could he expect to keep her? Once he took the time to examine the thongs on her ankles, apparently wishing to make sure that she was not uncomfortable. He looked up into her sullenly distressed face and asked: "Tired?" in a humanly sympathetic tone that made her blink back the tears. She shook her head and would not look at him. Al regarded her in silence for a minute, led Snake to his own horse, mounted, and rode on.

He was a murderer—he had undoubtedly killed many men. He would kill her if she attempted to escape—"and he could not catch me," Lorraine was just enough to add. Yet she felt baffled; cheated of the full horror of being kidnaped.

She had no knowledge of a bad man who was human in spots without being repentant. For love of a girl, she had been taught to believe, the worst outlaw would weep over his past misdeeds, straighten his shoulders, look to heaven for help, and become a self-sacrificing hero for whom audiences might be counted upon to shed furtive tears.

Al Woodruff, however, did not love her. His eyes had once or twice softened to friendliness, but love was not there. Neither was repentance there. He seemed quite satisfied with himself, quite ready to commit further crimes for sake of his own safety or desire. He was hard, she decided, but he was not unnecessarily harsh; cruel, without being wantonly brutal. He was, in short, the strangest man she had ever seen.

CHAPTER XXI.

Before sundown they reached the timberland on Bear Top. The horses slipped on the pine needles when Al left the trail and rode up a gentle incline where the trees grew large and there was little underbrush. It was very beautiful, with the slanting sun rays painting broad yellow bars across the gloom of the forest. In a little while they reached the crest of that slope, and Lorraine, looking back, could only guess at where the trail wound on among the trees lower down.

Al halted here, long enough to shoot and gather up a broken-winged grouse that lit before them.

When he was ready to go on, Snake refused to budge. Tough as he was, he had at last reached the limit of his energy and ambition. Al yanked hard on the bridle reins, then rode back and struck him sharply

with his quirt before Snake would rouse himself enough to move forward. He went stiffly, reluctantly, pulling back until his head was held straight out before him. Al dragged him so for a rod or two, lost patience, and returned to whip him forward again.

"What a brute you are!" Lorraine exclaimed indignantly. "Can't you see how tired he is?"

Al glanced at her from under his eyebrows. "He's all in, but he's got to make it," he said. "I've been that way myself—and made it. What I can do, a horse can do. Come on, you yella-livered bonehead!"

Snake went on, urged now and then by Al's quirt. Every blow made Lorraine wince, and she made the wincing perfectly apparent to Al, in the hope that he would take some notice of it and give her a chance to tell him what she thought of him without opening the conversation herself.

But Al did not say anything. When the time came—as even Lorraine saw that it must—when Snake refused to attempt a steep slope, Al said nothing. He untied hre ankles from the stirrups and her hands from the saddle horn, carried her in his arms to his own horse and compelled her to mount. Then he retied her exactly as she had been tied on Snake.

"Skinner knows this trail," he told Lorraine. "And I'm behind yuh with a gun. Don't forget that, Miss Spitfire. You let Skinner go to suit himself. If he goes wrong you pay, because it'll be you reining him wrong. Get along there, Skinner!"

Skinner got along in a businesslike way that told why Al Woodruff had chosen to ride him on this trip. He seemed to be a perfectly dependable saddle horse for a bandit to own. He wound in and out among the trees and bowlders, stepped carefully over fallen logs, thrust his nose out straight, laid back his ears, and pushed his way through thickets of young pines, went circumspectly along the edge of a deep gulch, climbed over a ridge, and worked his way down the precipitous slope on the farther side, made his way around a thick clump of spruces, and stopped in a little, grassy glade no bigger than a city lot, but with a spring gurgling somewhere near. He swung his head around and looked over his shoulder inquiringly at Al, who was coming behind leading Snake.

Lorraine looked at him also, but Al did not say anything to her or to the horse. He let them stand there and wait while he unsaddled Snake, put a drag rope on him, and led him to the best grazing. Then, coming back, he very matter of factly untied Lorraine and helped her off the horse. Lorraine was prepared to fight, but she did not quite know how to struggle with a man who did not take hold of her or touch her except to steady her in dismounting. Unconsciously she waited for a cue, and the cue was not given.

Al's mind seemed intent upon making Skinner comfortable. Still, he kept an eye on Lorraine, and he did not turn his back to her. She looked out to where Snake, too exhausted to eat, stood with drooping head and all four legs braced like sticks under him. It flashed across Lorraine's mind that not even her old director would order her to make a run for that horse and try to get away on him. Snake looked as if he would never move from that position until he toppled over.

Al pulled the bridle off Skinner, gave him a half-affectionate slap on the rump, and watched him go off switching his tail and nosing the ground for a likable place to roll. Al's glance went on to Snake, and from him to Lorraine.

"You sure do know how to ride hell out of a horse," he remarked. "Now he'll be stiff and sore to-morrow—and we've got quite a ride to make."

His tone of disapproval sent a guilty feeling through Lorraine, until she remembered that a slow horse might save her from this man who was all bad—except, perhaps, just on the surface which was not altogether repellent. She looked around at the tiny basin set like a saucer among the pines. Already the dusk was painting deep shadows in the woods across the opening, and turning the sky a darker blue. Skinner rolled over twice, got up, and shook himself with a satisfied snort and went away to feed. She might, if she were patient, run to the horse when Al's back was turned. Once in the woods she might have some chance of eluding him, and perhaps Skinner would show as much wisdom going as he had in coming, and take her down to the sageland.

But Skinner walked to the farther edge of the meadow before he stopped, and Al Woodruff never turned his back to a foe. An owl hooted unexpectedly, and Lorraine edged closer to her captor, who was gathering dead

branches one by one and throwing them toward a certain spot which he had evidently selected for a camp fire. He looked at her keenly, even suspiciously, and pointed with the stick in his left hand.

"You might go over there by the saddle and set down till I get a fire going," he said. "Don't go wandering around aimless, like a hen turkey watching a chance to duck into the brush. There's bear in there, and lion and lynx, and I'd hate to see you chawed. They never clean their toenails, and blood poison generally sets in where they leave a scratch. Go and set down."

Lorraine did not know how much of his talk was truth, but she went and sat down by his saddle and began braiding her hair in two tight braids like a squaw. If she did get a chance to run, she thought, she did not want her hair flying loose to catch on bushes and briers. She had once fled through a brush patch in Griffith Park with her hair flowing loose, and she had not liked the experience, though it had looked very nice on the screen.

Before she had finished the braiding, Al came over to the saddle and untied his slicker and laid out a piece of bacon, a package of coffee, a small coffeepot, bannock, and salt. The coffeepot and the grouse he took in one hand—his left, Lorraine observed—and started toward the spring which she could hear gurgling in the shadows among the trees.

Lorraine watched him sidelong. He seemed to take it for granted now that she would stay where she was. The woods were dark, the firelight and the warmth enticed her. The sight of the supper preparations made her hungrier than she had ever been in her life before. When one has breakfasted on one cup of coffee at dawn, and has ridden all day with nothing to eat, running away from food, even though that food is in the hands of one's captor, requires courage. Lorraine was terribly tempted, at least, to stay until she had eaten. But Al might not give her another chance like this. She crept on her knees to the slicker and seized one piece of bannock, went out of the firelight stealthily, then sprang to her feet and began running straight across the meadow.

Twenty yards she had covered when a bullet sang over her head. Lorraine ducked, stumbled, and fell headfirst over a hummock, not quite sure that she had not been shot.

"Thought maybe I could trust yuh to play square," Al said disgustedly, pulling her to her feet, the gun still smoking in his hands. "You little fool, what do you think you'd do in these hills alone? You sure enough belittle me, if you think you'd have a chance in a million of getting away from me!"

She fought him, then, with a great, inner relief that the situation was at last swinging around to a normal kidnaping. Still, Al Woodruff seemed unable to play his part realistically. He failed to fill her with fear and repulsion. She had to think back, to remember that he had killed men, in order to realize her own danger. Now, for instance, he merely forced her back to the camp fire, pulled the saddle strings from his pocket, and tied her feet together, using a complicated knot. Then he went calmly to work cooking their supper.

Lorraine was hungry. She broiled the meat. She drank a cup of black coffee, and returned the cup to the killer, who unconcernedly drank from it without any previous rinsing. She ate bannock with her meat, and secretly thought what an adventure it would be if only it were not real—if only she were not threatened with a forced marriage to this man.

"I guess you're tired," he said suddenly, rousing himself from deep study and looking at her imperturbably. "I'll fix yuh so you can sleep—and that's about all yuh can do."

He went over to his saddle, took the blanket and unfolded it until Lorraine saw that it was a full-size bed blanket of heavy gray wool. The man's ingenuity seemed endless. Without seeming to have any extra luggage, he had, nevertheless, carried a very efficient camp outfit with him. He took his hunting knife, went to the spruce grove and cut many small, green branches, returning with all he could hold in his arms. She watched him lay them tips up for a mattress, and was secretly glad that she knew this much at least of camp comfort. He spread the blanket over them and then, without a word, came over to her and untied her feet.

"Go and lay down on the blanket," he commanded.

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" Lorraine set her mouth stubbornly.

"Well, then I'll have to lay you down," said Al, lifting her to her feet. "If you get balky, I'm liable to get rough."

Lorraine drew away from him as far as she could and looked at him for a full minute. Al stared back into her eyes. "Oh, I could *kill* you!" cried Lorraine for the second time that day, and threw herself down on the bed sobbing like an angry child.

Al said nothing. The man's capacity for keeping still was amazing. He knelt beside her, folded the blanket over her from the two sides, rolled her over on her face, and tied the corners around her neck snugly, the knot at the back. In the same way he tied her ankles. Lorraine found herself in a sleeping bag from which she had small hope of extricating herself. He took his coat, folded it compactly, and pushed it under her head for a pillow, brought her own saddle blanket and spread it over her for extra warmth, and kicked the embers of the fire apart.

"Now stop your bawling and go to sleep," he advised her calmly. "You ain't hurt, and you ain't going to be as long as you behave yourself."

She saw him draw the slicker over his shoulders and move back where the shadows were deep and she could not see him. She heard some animal squall in the woods behind them. She looked up at the stars, which seemed brighter than she had ever seen them before. Insensibly she quieted, watching the stars, listening to the night noises, catching now and then a whiff of smoke from Al Woodruff's cigarette. Before she knew that she was sleepy, she slept.

CHAPTER XXII.

Swan cooked himself a hasty meal while he studied the various possibilities of the case, and waited for further word from headquarters. He wanted to be sure that help had started, and to be able to estimate within an hour or two the probable time of its arrival, before he left the wireless. Jack he fed and left on watch outside the cabin, so that he could without risk keep open the door to the dugout.

He was not yet supplied with evidence enough to warrant arresting Warfield and Hawkins, but he hoped to get it when the real crisis came. They could not have known of Al Woodruff's intentions toward Lorraine, else they would have kept themselves in the background and would not have risked the failure of their own plan.

Swan's plan was to wait at the cabin until he knew that deputies were headed toward the pass. Then, with Jack it would be a simple matter to follow Warfield to where he overtook Al—supposing he did overtake him. If he did not, then Swan meant to be present when the meeting occurred. The dog would trail Al anywhere, since the scent would be less than twenty-four hours old. Swan would locate Warfield and lead him straight to Al Woodruff, and make his arrests. But he wanted to have the deputies there.

At dusk he got his call, and learned that four picked men had started for the pass, and that they would reach the divide by daybreak. Others were on their way to intercept Al Woodruff if he crossed before then.

It was all that Swan could have hoped for—more than he had dared to expect on such short notice. He notified the operator that he would not be there to receive anything else, until he returned to report that he had got his men.

He switched off the current, closed the case, and went out. With a bannock stuffed into one pocket, and a chunk of bacon in the other, he left the cabin and swung off again in that long, tireless stride of his, Jack following contentedly at his heels.

At the farther end of Sky-line Meadow he stopped, took a tough leather leash from his pocket, and fastened it to Jack's collar.

"We don't go running to paw nobody's stomach and say, 'Wow-wow! Here we are back again!'" he told the dog, pulling its ears affectionately. "Maybe we get shot or something like that. We trail, and we keep our mouth still, Yack. One bark, and I lick you good!"

Jack flashed out a pink tongue and licked his master's chin to show how little he was worried over the threat, and went trotting along at the end of the leash, taking Swan's trail and his own back to where they had climbed out of the cañon.

At the bottom Swan spoke to the dog in an undertone, and Jack obediently started up the cañon on the trail of the five horses who had passed that way since noon. It was starlight now, and Swan did not hurry. He was taking it for granted that Warfield and Hawkins would stop when it became too dark to follow the hoofprints, and without Jack to show them the way they would perforce remain where they were until daybreak.

They would do that, he reasoned, if they

were sincere in wanting to overtake Lorraine, and in their ignorance that they were also following Al Woodruff. And try as he would he could not see the object of so foolish a plan as this abduction carried out in collusion, with two men of unknown sentiments in the pretended hunting party. They had shown no suspicion of Al's part in the affair—and Swan grinned when he thought of the mutual surprise when they met.

He was not disappointed. They had reached timberline, following the seldom-used trail that wound over the divide to Bear Top Pass and so, by a difficult route, which he did not believe Al would attempt after dark, to the country beyond the mountain. Where dark overtook them they had stopped in a sheltered nook to wait, just as Swan had expected they would. They were close to the trail, where no one could pass without their knowledge.

In the belief that it was only Lorraine they were following, and that she would be frightened and would come to the cheer of a camp fire, they had a fine, inviting blaze. Swan made his way as close as he dared without being discovered, and sat down to wait. He could see nothing of the men until Lone appeared from the shadows and fed the flames more wood, and sat down where the light shone on his face.

Swan grinned again. Warfield had probably decided that Lorraine would be less afraid of Lone than of them, and had ordered him into the firelight as a sort of decoy. And Lone, knowing that Al Woodruff might be within shooting distance, was probably much more uncomfortable than he looked.

He sat with his legs crossed in true range fashion, and stared into the fire while he smoked. He was a fair mark for an enemy who might be lurking out there in the dark, but he give no sign that he realized the danger. Neither did he wear any air of expectancy. Warfield and Hawkins might wait and listen and hope that Lorraine, wide-eyed and weary, would steal up to the warmth of the fire; but not Lone.

Swan sat down on a rotting log, became uneasy at the fine target which Lone made by the fire, and drew Al Woodruff's blue bandanna from his pocket. He held it to Jack's nose and whispered, "You find him, Yack—and I lick you good if you bark." Jack sniffed, dropped his nose to the ground, and began tugging at the leash. Swan got up and, moving stealthily, followed the dog.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A chill wind that hurried over Bear Top ahead of the dawn brought Swan and Jack clattering up the trail that dipped into Spirit Cañon. Warfield rose stiffly from the one-sided warmth of the fire and walked a few paces to meet him, shrugging his wide shoulders at the cold, and rubbing his thigh muscles that protested against movement. Much riding upon upholstered cushions had not helped Senator Warfield retain the tough muscles of hard-riding Bill Warfield. The senator was saddle sore as well as hungry, and his temper showed in his bloodshot eyes. He would have quarreled with his best-beloved woman that morning, and he began on Swan.

Why hadn't he come back down the gulch yesterday and helped track the girl, as he was told to do? The senator had quite unpleasant opinions of Swedes and crazy women, and dogs that were always around when they were not wanted, and he expressed them fluently.

Swan explained with a great deal of labor that he had not thought he was wanted, and that he had to sleep on his claim sometimes or the law would take it from him, maybe. Also he virtuously pointed out that he had come with Yack before daylight to the cañon to see if they had found Miss Hunter and gone home, or if they were still hunting for her.

"If you like to find that young lady, I put Yack on the trail quick," he offered placatingly. "I bet you Yack finds her in one half an hour."

With much unnecessary language Senator Warfield told him to get to work, and the three tightened cinches, mounted their hump-backed horses, and prepared to follow Swan's lead. Swan watched his chance and gave Lone a chunk of bannock as a substitute for breakfast, and Lone, I may add, dropped behind his companions and ate every crumb of it in spite of his worry over Lorraine.

Indeed, Swan eased that worry, too, when they were climbing the pine slope where Al had killed the grouse. Lone had forged ahead on John Doe, and Swan stopped suddenly, pointing to the spot where a few bloody feathers and a boot print showed. The other evidence Jack had eaten in the night.

" 'Raine's all right. I've got men coming. Keep your gun handy," he murmured, and

turned away as the others rode up eager for whatever news Swan had to offer.

"Something killed a bird," Swan explained politely, planting one of his own big feet over the track which did not in the least resemble Lorraine's. "Yack! you find that young lady, quick!"

From there on Swan walked carefully, putting his foot wherever a print of Al's boot was visible. Since he was much bigger than Al, with a correspondingly longer stride, his gait puzzled Lone until he saw just what Swan was doing. Then his eyes lightened with amused appreciation of the Swede's cunning.

"We ought to have some hot drink, or whisky, when we find that girl," Hawkins muttered unexpectedly, riding up beside Lone as they crossed an open space. "She'll be half dead with cold—if we find her alive."

Before Lone could answer Swan looked back at the two and raised his hand for them to stop.

"Better if you leave the horses here," he suggested. "From Yack I know we get close pretty quick. That young lady's horse maybe smells these horse and makes a noise, and crazy folks run from noise."

Without objection the three dismounted and tied their horses securely to trees. Then, with Swan and Jack leading the way, they climbed over the ridge and descended into the hollow by way of the ledge which Skinner had negotiated so carefully the night before. Without the dog they never would have guessed that any one had passed this way, but as it was they made good progress and reached the nearest edge of the spruce thicket just as the sun was making ready to push up over the sky line.

They heard a horse sneeze, beyond the spruce grove, and Warfield stepped forward authoritatively, waving Swan back. This, his manner said plainly, was first and foremost his affair and from now on he would take charge of the situation. At his heels went Hawkins, and Swan sent an oblique glance of satisfaction toward Lone, who answered it with his half smile. Swan himself could not have planned the approach more to his liking.

The smell of bacon cooking watered their mouths and made Warfield and Hawkins look at one another inquiringly. Crazy young women would hardly be expected to carry a camping outfit. But Swan and Lone were treading close on their heels, and their own curiosity pulled them forward. They went carefully around the thicket, guided by the pungent odor of burning pine wood, and halted so abruptly that Swan and Lone bumped into them from behind. A man had risen up from the camp fire and faced them, his hands rising slowly, palms outward.

"Warfield, by——" Al blurted in his outraged astonishment. "Trailing me with a bunch, are yuh? I knew you'd double cross your own father—but I never thought you had it in you to do it in the open. Damn yuh, what d'yuh want that you expect to get?"

Warfield stared at him, slack-jawed. He glanced furtively behind him at Swan, and found that guileless youth ready to poke him in the back with the muzzle of a gun. Lone, he observed, had another. He looked back at Al, whose eyes were ablaze with resentment. With an effort he smiled his disarming, senatorial smile, but Al's next words froze it on his face.

"I think I know the play you're making, but it won't get you anything, Bill Warfield. You think I slipped up—and you told me not to let my foot slip; said you'd hate to lose me. Well, you're the one that slipped, you damned, rotten coward. I was watching out for leaks. I stopped two, and this one here——"

He glanced down at Lorraine, who sat beside the fire, a blanket tied tightly around her waist and her ankles so that, while comfortably free, she could make no move to escape.

"I was fixing to stop *her* from telling all she knew," he added harshly. "By to-night I'd have had her married to me, you damned fool. And here you've blocked everything for me, afraid I was falling down on my job!

"Now, folks, lemme just tell you a few little things. I know my limit—you've got me dead to rights. I ain't complaining about that; a man in my game expects to get his some day. But I ain't going to let the man go that paid me my wages and a bonus of five hundred dollars for every man I killed that he wanted outa the way."

"You lie!" yelled Warfield.

"Hawkins knows that's a fact," Woodruff persisted. "He's foreman of the Sawtooth and he knows the agreement. I've got to say for Hawkins that aside from stealing cattle off the nesters and helping make evi-

dence against some that's in jail, Hawkins never done any dirty work. He didn't have to. They paid *me* for that end of the business.

"I killed Fred Thurman—this girl, here saw me shoot him. And it was when I told Warfield I was afraid she might set folks talking that he began to get cold feet. Up to then everything was lovely, but Warfield began to crawfish a little. We figured—*we* figured; emphasize the *we*, folks—that the Quirt would have to be put outa business. We knew if the girl told Brit and Frank, they'd maybe get the nerve to try and pin something on us. We've stole 'em blind for years, and they wouldn't cry if we got hung. Besides, they was friendly with Fred."

Warfield at various times tried to stop him, calling him a lunatic, but he continued to talk:

"And let me tell you, folks, Warfield raised hell with me because Brit Hunter wasn't killed when he pitched over the grade. He held out on me for that job—so I'm collecting five hundred dollars' worth of fun right now. He did say he'd pay me after Brit was dead, but it looks like Brit's going to pull through, so I ain't counting much on getting my money outa Warfield."

His eyes left Warfield's face and went beyond the staring group. His face darkened, a sneer twisted his lips.

"Who're them others?" he cried harshly. "Was you afraid four wouldn't be enough to take me?"

The four turned heads to look. Bill Warfield never looked back, for Al's gun spoke, and Warfield sagged at the knees and the shoulders and he slumped to the ground at the instant when Al's gun spoke again.

"That's for you, Lone Morgan," Al cried. "She talked about you in her sleep last night. She called you Loney, and she wanted you to come and get her. I was going to kill you first chance I got. I coulda loved this little girl. I—could——"

He was down, bleeding and coughing and trying to talk. Swan had shot him, and two of the deputies who had been there through half of Al's bitter talk. Lorraine, unable to get up and run, too sturdy of soul to faint, rolled over and away from him, her lips held tightly together, her eyes wide with horror. Al crawled after her, his eyes pleading.

He died too soon to know that his shot at Lone had missed him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The story itself is ended. To go on would be to begin another story; to tell of the building up of the Quirt outfit, with Lone and Lone's savings playing a very important part, and with Brit a semi-invalided, retired stockman who smoked his pipe and told the young couple what they should do and how they should do it.

Frank he mourned for and seldom mentioned. The Sawtooth, under the management of a greatly chastened young Bob Warfield, was slowly winning its way back to the respect of its neighbors. The senator is in jail awaiting trial on various charges.

Oh, by the way, Swan "proved up" as soon as possible, on his homestead, and sold out to the Quirt. His work as a detective for more than a year, investigating land frauds, had been crowned with success. Lone managed to buy the Thurman ranch also, and the TJ up-and-down is on its feet again as a cattle ranch. Sorry and Jim will ride for the Quirt, I suppose, as long as they can crawl into a saddle, but there are younger men now to ride the Sky-line Meadow Range.

Some one asked about Yellowjacket, having, I suppose, a sneaking regard for his infirmities. He hasn't been peeled yet—or he hadn't, the last I heard of him. Lone and Lorraine told me they were trying to save him for the "little feller" to practice on when he is able to sit up without a cushion behind his back, and to hold something besides a rubber rattle. And—oh, do you know how Lone is teaching the Little Feller to sit up on the floor? He took a horse collar and scrubbed it until he nearly wore out the leather. Then he brought it to the cabin, put it on the floor, and set the Little Feller inside it.

They sent me a snapshot of the event, but it is not very good. The film was under-exposed, and nothing was to be seen of the Little Feller except a hazy spot which I judged was a hand, holding a black object I guessed was the ridgy, rubber rattle with the whistle gone out of the end—down the Little Feller's throat, they are afraid. And there was his smile, and a glimpse of his eyes.

THE END.

A Man of Iron

By H. de Vere Stacpoole

Author of "The Gold Trail," "The Beach of Dreams," Etc.

IV—MONEY TALKS

WE were held three weeks in Rapa Lagoon, refitting first, and then waiting for the wind.

There was nothing to read but the "Pacific Directory," the "Nautical Almanac," a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* three months old, picked up at Ducie, and the third volume of "Red as a Rose Is She," with the old yellow Mudie label still on the cover.

It was then that Captain Tom turned up trumps with his chat about the islands and his stories of the man Sigurdson. His intimate knowledge of Sigurdson's past and mental make-up astonished me; the explanation, which you shall hear some day, perhaps, astonished me more, and it explained how his yarns always had for protagonist this yellow-bearded figure of a man, whose every life episode seemed to involve a question of ethics.

One was always left hanging half in doubt. Is a man justified, for instance, in annexing, on a desert island, a hatful of pearls without seeming owner, and sailing off with them, leaving behind a mean-minded villian with the heart of a traitor and the material for blackmail in his possession?

It was this question, occurring to me one night as we sat on deck, that started another yarn.

The captain was talking of owners, a term synonymous with robbers, or so you would have judged from his talk, when I cut in with a question involving the morality of Sigurdson.

"It's all very well," said the captain, "talking like that in an armchair, but when a man's driven he's got to move without asking questions. If you're chased by a buffalo you run, don't you? You don't stop to inquire as to whether he has any right to chase you or whether you're a coward to run. If one of them head-hunting guys in the Solomons was going for you with a spear, you'd shoot, wouldn't you? You wouldn't wait to think of the rights of native races or the black man's burden—which is the white man. You'd shoot. Lord love a duck, it makes me feel I want to be sick, sometimes, hearing city sharps that never move, except in tram cars and such, talking of morality. You can't bother about points of morality when you're running, and Sigurdson was running. Look at his position. There he was on that atoll, with the *Martin Hyke* lying in the lagoon, the only other white man a beast ready to blackmail him, and a sackful of pearls to be blackmailed out of. Was he wrong to give that chap the slip and sail off without him? Well, I don't know. I'd have done it myself; so would you. But if he was wrong, anyhow, he was paid out."

"How was he paid out?" I asked.

Captain Tom did not seem to hear the question. He rose up and went below and then returned with a tumbler half filled, which he placed beside him on the deck as he sat down and resumed.

"How was he which? Paid out? Well, I don't know if you'd call it 'paid out,' seeing he hadn't done more nor you and I would have done, and seeing that it's always the skunks that get away with the boodle and bank it and end up respectable citizens with wives and families, propagating their species and subscribing to missionary funds. Anyhow, this is what happened to him, and you can call it what you like.

"Sigurdson being the only white man on that ship, she had to go where he wanted and the kanakas were willing enough to obey his orders; for all his stiff ways he was a straight man, and they read him for that, right off.

"The *Martin Hyke* had been bound for Ducie, so Barton had told him, but he wasn't going to Ducie to be overlooked and questioned; not likely. He had no plans in his head, and, to give himself time to think, he laid a course due west and went down to the cabin, leaving the deck in charge of the

kanaka bos'n. Down below he had a rough time of it, fighting it out all alone with no one to help or give a hand.

"He'd as good as stolen that ship. Mind you, he hadn't stolen her, nor wished to steal her, but there it was; he'd as good as done it in the eyes of the Board of Trade, and that's the only eyes that matter as far as a seaman is concerned. Her captain was dead, Barton had been first officer, and he'd marooned Barton. Stealing and marooning, to say nothing of the pearls, that was what he was up against.

"If he took her into any port he couldn't be sure the kanakas wouldn't talk and tell the story of how he'd left Barton. They hated Barton, but that didn't matter; kanakas are magpies and you can't train them different, not with a sledge hammer.

"He got the chart and studied it. There were heaps and heaps of places he could go to, but he didn't want to go to them. Pitcairn was no use, Ducie was out of count, Easter Island belonged to Chile, Tahiti was too crowded, besides being French, and he didn't know anything of French port law, though he'd heard the French were h—l on the customs. There was a strew of small islands to be chosen from, but he was as blind as Adam as to the chances.

"Then giving it up and trusting in Providence, he fixed on one in the Paumotus. Ramua was the name. He had no "Pacific Directory" to look it up, and the way he fixed on it was this: he took the names of three likely islands, wrote them on three bits of paper, shuffled them, and picked out Ramua.

"He was a decent navigator and the kanakas weren't a bad crew, and he reckoned to make Ramua on the third day from that. Ramua isn't more than two hundred miles from here; it's not in the Paumotus proper—it's an outlier.

"You've never been in the Paumotus? Well, you never want to go there; all reefs and atolls and currents setting every which way and the winds not dependable; the name's enough to give any underwriter fits—but, as I was saying, Ramua is an outlier and he reckoned to raise it three days from that, somewhere about noon if the wind held.

"Well, he raised something that afternoon that wasn't an island, a little old brig that altered her course when she sighted the *Martin Hyke,* and flew a distress signal. They closed up and she sent a boat aboard. Sigurdson didn't like the look of her. A mangy-looking tub she was, and he didn't like the look of the chap that came over the rail.

"He had only one eye, but that was a gimlet, and nothing on but an undershirt and pair of pants. A Yank from Eastport or somewhere that way; gave his family history and name of his tub; wanted water and fruit, if Sigurdson could let him have any.

"Sig fished out a bunch of bananas, but said he couldn't part with any water. The chap didn't seem to mind; it was the fruit he was after, making a pretense of wanting water; then he got some biscuits and a few sticks of tobacco and, having cadged all he could, put his leg over the rail.

" 'We're a powerful sick ship,' says he, before he dropped into the boat.

" 'What's your sickness?' asks Sigurdson.

" 'Lord knows,' says the other, 'but I've lost two chaps, and there's more down with it.'"

Black measles, that was what he'd got aboard, and soon Sigurdson found it out.

II.

"They raised Ramua on the third day, but earlier than they'd expected, maybe three hours after sunup. It's an atoll pretty much the same as this, but more palm trees and smaller.

"Ramua is pretty much good for nothing; there's no shell, not enough palms for copra, but a fine beach, a tremendous lot of sand is there, and the lagoon beach is pretty much twice as broad as this one. If you could get Ramua under tow and haul it up convenient to the 'Merican coast, it would make an A1 bathing place; being where it is, it's pretty well useless, though ships call there often enough for water and fruit, and whalers for wood, sometimes.

"Now, just then there was a chap living on Ramua, the funniest guy God A'mighty ever created. Beazley was his name. He'd been a consumptive, and he'd got money of his own, something in the way of a couple of thousand dollars a year, and he'd built a house for himself, and there he lived with a handful of kanakas, whose only work was fishing and climbing the trees to make palm toddy for him.

"He gave them tobacco and trade goods,

sometimes, and they pretty well fed him and kept him in drink, and he had a sort of a wife and said he was a socialist; or that he and the kanakas were all equal and shared and shared alike. I reckon he was the only man that ever made that game work and pay, for he lived for next to nothing and had the time of his life, being a lazy swab, though good-natured.

"The *Martin Hyke* came into the lagoon, getting along after midday, and Beazley came down beaming to meet her, rowed out to show her the best anchorage, and came aboard for drinks and to swap news; and Sigurdson saw at once he had nothing to fear from this chap—spotted him for a crank on sight, and found he'd hit the bull's-eye when the socialist clack began, which it did, almost as soon as they'd taken their seats in the cabin before a bottle of square-face and a box of Barton's cigars.

"Beazley was the kind of chap that's so full of himself he starts unloading cargo first wharf of a stranger he comes alongside, hatch covers off and winches and derricks going before the mooring hawsers are passed, you might say.

"Never stopped to ask Sigurdson's doings, or more than where he hailed from, not listening even to that, a most convenient party to a chap in Sigurdson's position, but apt to get tiresome after a bit.

"When he'd scoffed half the bottle of gin and unloaded himself a bit, he took Sigurdson ashore and showed him his house and his native wife and the garden he'd had planted for him by her relatives, and the chicken run and all such; then he stood him a dinner, and gave him sucking pig and palm salad and toddy, and sent him off back to the *Martin Hyke* wishing he was a socialist.

III.

"That sort of thing went on for some days, Sigurdson making great friends with t'other chap, but still not seeing his way how to get out of his fix.

"He thought of turning socialist like Beazley, and landing for good and having a hut built for him by the natives, but the pearls were driving him all the time; and not only that, the thought of what he was to do with the *Martin Hyke*. Taking the pearls ashore and hiding them while he lived free and easy wouldn't bring him any closer to the main proposition, which was how to turn them into cash, and the *Hyke* was a danger to him as long as she lay there in the lagoon, for the first ship master that came in would be sure to ask questions. Besides that, there was the kanakas on board.

"The ship's stores were pretty low, and the food to be had on Ramua wasn't more than enough to keep Beazley and the standin' population in comfort. You see how he was fixed. No more idea than a decapitated fowl what to do, being barred off ports, and islands showing not more chances to be got than here at Ramua.

"Near driven crazy he was, lying awake at nights trying to figure things out, and all the time the black measles working like gimlets among the hands unknownst to him. Then one fine morning it let fly, the kanaka bos'n being the first man struck, and by noon that day half the hands were down, the balance followed next day, and the day after they were dying like flies.

"The lagoon had filled up with sharks, and as the chaps died they were hove over and the sharks took them; Beazley came aboard to help and doctor the sick chaps, for he'd had measles and wasn't afraid of infection, and he was as fond of doctoring people as of preaching his socialism.

"Ramua had cured him of consumption, but he always put the cure down to some physic he'd made for himself out of some rubbish that was bound to cure everything, and he was as happy as a sand boy shoving it into the sick kanakas and feeling their pulses before they were hove into the lagoon. There was only one kanaka that didn't take the sickness, and he was the only one that didn't die.

"The thing had turned the ship upside down, for they'd had to bring some of the sick chaps into the cabin, and Sigurdson was mortally afraid that some of them might get loose in their ravings and turn out the pearls which he'd stowed in a spare bunk. Beazley wanted to stick a chap in that bunk, but he managed to prevent him, and he had to keep about there most of the time. It was pretty teasing work, but it didn't last long, and when the last of the crowd was hove overboard he came ashore to live, leaving the *Martin Hyke* to herself, with the hatches and skylight off for the sun to fumigate her. The natives built him a hut to live in, and he rowed off to her twice a day, pretending to have a look at the cargo to

see it wasn't spoiling, but in reality to see the pearls were all right."

Captain Tom left off his yarn to light his pipe. The ripple of the outgoing tide on plank and mooring chain came threadlike against the rumble of the reef, above which hung the moon like a blazing shield.

"He should have told Beazley," said I; "a good-natured chap like that with no need for money would have helped him out."

The captain cocked one eye at me over the match blaze. Then, after he had smoked for a moment in silence, he went on:

"Did you ever hear tell of a chap by name of Rockfeller?" asked he.

"Yes."

"Well, years and years ago, he had no more need for money, yet I never heard of him not clutching it first chance when it showed. It's not only men needs money, it's money needs men, that's God's truth. Money is as quick after some folk as Satan, and once it jumps on a chap's back it rides him like a jockey.

"A chap may be living as happy as you like on ten cents a day, till money pokes its head up and calls him. Then he's done. Money talks, and more than that, it beckons, and I reckon Sigurdson had that fact in his head when he decided to say nothing to Beazley about the pearls.

"He just let things go, praying that the next ship that came in would have a deaf-and-dumb captain and a blind first officer; failing that, a pair of fools who'd give him a passage to some port, him and his pearls, and say nothing of the *Martin Hyke.* If all the crew had been dead of the measles things would have been easy, but there was one kanaka, if you'll remember, spared by the Providence that puts grits in chaps' eyes, and one kanaka's as good as a dozen to talk.

"Now, this chap Beazley was a man of regular habits, and one of his regular habits was to get drunk every fo'tnight on palm toddy, regular as the tick of a clock. Not uproarious, just amiable drunk, with a good dinner for a foundation; and when the time for his next half-monthly came round he invited Sigurdson to help him, and Sig, having nothing better to do, stood in.

"Sigurdson had a good head, but he wasn't used to palm toddy, not in gallons, anyway; and, being troubled in his mind, the let-up of the drink made him take more than he could well carry. Sitting there on the veranda of Beazley's house with the stuff at his elbow and a cigar in his mouth:

" 'You're a good chap,' says he to Beazley.

" 'So are you,' says the other. 'The best I ever struck; and what you have to do,' says he, 'is to come here and live here always. I have no friends and relations,' he says, 'only you,' says he, 'and we've got to be like brothers. Whach you want better than here,' he says, 'where every prospect pleases and there aren't men enough to be vile; *ain't* you happy?'

"Then Sigurdson, half crying, gets up and clasps the other guy by the hand and swears eternal friendship and sits down again in his basket chair as if his legs had been knocked from under him.

" 'No,' he says, 'I'm not happy.'

" 'What's ailing you?' asks the other.

" 'That ship in the lagoon,' says he.

"Then he sets to and gives hints of the business, but not a word he says about the pearls. He had that much sense left in him. He just hints that, owing to no fault of his own, he had to take the *Martin Hyke* from its proper owners and, if she was found on him, so to speak, there'd be trouble.

" 'Never you mind,' says Beazley, 'I'll see you through; I'll see you aren't hurt over the business,' he says; 'you leave it all to me and I'll fix a plan.'

"Then they go on drinking, and at last Sigurdson gets to his hut, helped by t'other one, and in he goes and drops asleep.

IV.

"Next morning he wakes, with a head on him and a tongue like the tongue of a parrot. Then when he came out on the beach he reckoned his mind was damaged.

"The *Martin Hyke* was gone. Nothing left of her but her topmasts sticking out of the water and gulls roosting on them.

"He runs to Beazley's house, and that beauty was just coming out on the veranda in his pajamas with a livener in his fist. 'The *Hyke's* gone,' says Sigurdson. He couldn't say more, he was that beaten up.

" 'I know,' says Beazley, with a wink; 'sit down. I scuttled her myself last night after I'd laid you out in your hut; told you I'd take her off your mind!'

" 'You what?' says Sigurdson, taking his seat on the step.

" 'Rowed off and bored three holes in her,'

says Beazley; 'easy as boring through cheese. Her planks were dry rotten.'

"'O Lord! O Lord!' says Sigurdson. He was thinking of the pearls, lost and gone, sunk by this fathead that was standing and grinning at him, 's if he'd done something clever.

"'What's up now?' asks Beazley.

"Then it all came out. Beazley sat down to drink it in proper. Then he gets angry.

"'You should have told me of them,' he says. 'If you hadn't mistrusted me, this wouldn't have happened; you had no confidence in me——' and he goes on.

"Then he quieted down. 'The thing is now,' he says, 'what's to be done?'

"'Done?' says Sigurdson. 'I'm done; there she lies, and who's to raise her?'

"'Raise your gran'mother,' says Beazley. 'We've only got to dive to get them.'

"Now, to lay claws on those pearls a chap would have had to go down through the cabin hatchway, find his way through a black-dark cabin, or as near black-dark as possible, to the bunk where they were, uncover the boxes of the truck Sigurdson had laid on them, and fetch them back. No man could do it on his own lungs. It was a diver's work, and they had no diving dresses or pump. Sigurdson said so.

"All the same, Beazley, just to try, sent down one of the kanakas. They saw the chap at the cabin hatch, but he wouldn't go any farther, and he was the best diver on that island.

"'Well,' says Beazley, 'I reckon we'll have to wait till we get diving dresses and proper tackle.'

"'And when will that be?' asked Sigurdson.

"'Next ship in,' replies the other. 'If she's going to any likely port, I'll go myself and fetch them back if it costs me ten thousand dollars. It's up to me to do it, and I want no share in the money you get for the pearls, seeing it was my fault they were lost.'

"Now, fetching that gear wasn't easy, by any means. It was easy enough to take the next ship that came in that was going to some likely port, but to come back he'd have either to hire a schooner or light on some ship that was going Ramua way and pay for a set-down.

"However, that was nothing to Beazley, who had money enough, and, besides, as he said, he was a bit stiff, with five years in Ramua, and wouldn't mind stretching his legs again in a seaport town, Sydney for choice.

"Then they shook hands on the bargain and settled down to wait for a ship. A week later she came; a whaler she was and no use, being bound for the South Shetlands or somewhere, with half her oil barrels empty. They let her go, and then, a month later, came what they wanted, a topsail schooner with a cargo of copra bound for Valparaiso.

"Horn was the name of her captain, and horn was his nature; one of those stiff-damn-your-eyes sort of chaps—you know the sort, didn't want any truck with any one. He'd put in to refit after a blow, and when he came on shore for vegetables he seemed to be looking over the reef all the time while he was talking to Beazley and Sig. Seemed to look on them as beach combers and, when Beazley asked for a passage, refused flat.

"He owned his own ship. That was what was the matter with him; had his wife on board and said he had no accommodation for passengers.

"Nice let-down for them, with not another ship likely for months, and that, maybe, another whaler. Beazley had a couple of cocktails and did a think.

"Then says he: 'There's no use, we'll have to let this chap into the business. He owns his own ship and seems to have money, for one thing; and I reckon he's a straight chap, for all his stiffness. If we have him in, it will make things work easier, and we'll make him pay for the diving gear. Besides that, we'll have to have a professional diver; I doubt if these kanakas would be any use without training, and neither you nor I know anything of the business.'

"They puts off in a boat and boards the *Haliotis;* that was her name. Horn was on deck, his wife below, and nobody to listen but a couple of kanakas. He raises his eyebrows.

"'We've come to have a talk with you,' says Beazley. 'I've come to lay a proposition before you in the name of myself and partner, but you must come ashore to my house to hear the rights of it.'

"'And what's the venture?' asks Horn.

"'Pearls,' says Beazley.

"Horn's nose begins to work. He looks at the chaps for a moment, then he got into the boat with them, and they took him ashore. He was ashore two hours, and his

nature wasn't horn any longer when that clack was done. He was sweating. Saw himself raised from the owner of a tin-pot schooner to the owner of a third share in a hatful of pearls worth Lord knows what, and all for nothing but the expense of a diving outfit and a return voyage from Valparaiso to Ramua.

"A third share, that was what Beazley put it at, telling Sigurdson in private that he would stand out and that he only went in as partner to bluff Horn so that Horn would take less.

"Horn couldn't talk of anything but the price of pearls and how to get rid of them; the yarn they'd told him of the *Martin Hyke* and how she'd sunk in a storm and how the pearls had no owners was pretty thin; that didn't matter to Horn, as long as the stuff was there. Money was talking to him, and he saw himself drinking champagne and rolling in his carriage instead of dough dishing round the islands with cargoes of copra in his rotten old schooner, and he went off that night hilarious, and next morning Beazley went aboard the *Haliotis*, and she put out with the tide. Beazley went to keep a clutch on Horn, lest he should give the show away. Give the show away!"

Captain Tom chuckled to himself for a moment, then he went below, brought up another drink, and resumed.

"Where was I getting to? Oh, aye—well, as the *Haliotis* was clearing the lagoon, Sigurdson went to the break to wave goodby and then he came back to his hut and sat at the door of it smoking and thinking how lonesome it was; and then, all at once, it came on him that these two chaps, Horn and Beazley, had him in their fists same as Wardrop and Pilcher had him once, but the thought only came to pass, for he believed in Beazley, and Horn couldn't kick—neither of them could kick, seeing the whole business was off-color and they were in it.

"Now I told you this Beazley had a wife.

"She used to cook his food with her own hands and kill sucking pigs for him and all such, and he couldn't kick and tell her to go and dispense with herself lest maybe she'd poison him or let off on the cooking, but he managed to keep her at a distance, as much as he could, and, bad as it was, it gave him something to do; and time wore along and two months passed till, one fine morning, back comes the *Haliotis*, with Horn and two divers and gear and suits and pipes and all such, but no Beazley.

"That was a nose-ender for Sig. 'For the love of Mike,' he says to Horn, 'where's Beazley?'

"'He's stayed behind in Valparaiso,' says Horn; 'he's laid up—left him lying in bed with consumption or something, and he says we're to carry on, and if he dies we're to have the whole of the boodle.'

"Sigurdson couldn't say anything more. He had it in his head that Horn had done Beazley in for his share, but he had no proofs. Not till he got to Valparaiso, and he could do nothing but sit and watch the diving. He drew a plan of the cabin and gave the position of the bunk where the pearls were, and the boat with the pump was moored over the *Hyke* and the diver went down.

"He was an expert, that chap, and the job in such shallow water was as easy to him as playing 'Home, Sweet Home' on the fiddle to Ole Bull. He had an electric torch and all, and down he went, and then his big head came up after half an hour and they'd opened his skylight.'

"'There's nothing in that bunk,' says he; 'no boxes nowhere, nor in any of the bunks—whacher talking about? Think I don't know my business—search—why, I can give you an inventory of everything in that cabin.' Do you see it all? Sig did in a jiff. That rotten Beazley, when Sig had refused to put a sick kanaka into the berth, had spotted something wrong. Must have prospected when Sig was on deck, found the stuff, and beat his brains for days to know how to collar it.

"They concluded to try back for Valparaiso and back they went, but there was no Beazley. He'd consumpted off somewhere else, and all the satisfaction they had was to stand on the wharf cursing him, though it wasn't his fault."

"Not his fault?"

"Not so much as the dollars'. There he was, living happy at Ramua on ten cents a week with his cough drops and his socialism, an honest man, when a million dollars up and hit him and knocked his honesty into flinders."

"There was a crack in it."

"Just so," said Captain Tom. "Same as maybe there is in yours and mine, only p'rhaps a bit wider."

They Are Not Far

By Henry C. Rowland

Author of "The Shaming of Andy McGill," "Utopia," Etc.

Doctor Rowland dips into spiritualism a bit in this story of rivalry in love and the desire of a departed warrior to aid his best friend in earthly affairs. When it comes to the depiction of a contest over a woman, you all know that Rowland has no superior, and in setting forth feminine charm he is likewise at his best. But there are features to this that he has not touched upon in his many other fine contributions to the literature of American life of to-day.

(*A Novelette*)

ALTHOUGH deeply grieved, Jim Davies was not surprised to learn that his chum Donald McKinloch had been killed in action. The news came while Jim was in a hospital convalescent from a wound and after the first pang of sorrow had abated it occurred to him that Donald's death had entailed a certain responsibility, though of what character he had not yet the remotest idea.

The two young officers had been war brothers, their intimacy beginning on the transport aboard which the Canadian regiment had embarked. It was rather a curious friendship, that of the wild Highlander who loved his bayonet as a drunkard loves his dram, and the quiet, cynical New Yorker, sportsman, clubman, and idler who fought with a sort of nonchalant ferocity quite equal to Donald's berserk rage.

The odd part about it was that the ties of sympathy which bound them had never evoked personal confidences or the history of their separate pasts, and neither knew or cared particularly what these might have held. The friendship was a by-product of the battlefield and purely of the present. Jim had heard indirectly that Donald was the second son of a Scotch baronet and that a few years before he had emigrated to the Northwest where he had bought a ranch. He had also a vague idea that the Scotsman was engaged to a girl out there, or a girl who had been out there with her father, who was a mining engineer, or something of the sort.

They had made their compact during a monotonous period of repose, partly in fun to pass the time, partly realizing that it had its serious side and that either might any day be called upon to fulfill his part of the obligation. This was that if one of them were to be killed in action, the other would carry out faithfully and to the best of his ability the three behests contained in a letter exchanged. As Jim had seen Donald chuckling over the conclusion of his, he did not take the compact with any great concern.

Well, here was the whole regiment shot to pieces and Jim presently to rejoin it with the rank of major, which from the way things were going he might hope to exercise for a day or so. Donald, he reflected, had probably got a short head start of him for Walhalla, and that was about all. So it was more with the idea of having a few moments' sad amusement than anything else that he took the sealed letter from his portfolio, and, limping out on the terrace, sought a quiet place to examine it.

The first thing presented for his inspection was the photograph of a girl. It was a very pretty girl, quite a beauty, in fact, so far as one could tell from the snapshot. She was in riding costume, khaki blouse open at the throat with elbow sleeves, short skirt, and long, buttoned, leather leggings. A pistol swung in its holster from her belt, and she held a short, cavalry carbine. She was bareheaded and smiling, her face principally mouth and eyes with what appeared to be a good deal of dark, curly hair. Jim reflected with a stab of sorrow that here was

precisely the sort of full-powered, out-of-door girl that Donald should have lived to marry.

He took out the letter which was closely written in a small, round, regular hand in strange contrast to the writer's large, square, angular person. But Donald, Jim reflected, was a wielder of the pen as well as the sword, an Oxonian, a hard student of philosophic mind, and given at times to the composition of verses, these usually of a spiritual character and possessed of considerable merit. Like many Scotch Highlanders, he had his strongly spiritual side, and in their conversation had often referred casually to occult experiences which, coming from another, Jim would have regarded as pose or mental unstability. Of recent months, however, he had been far less sure about his materialistic findings.

If Jim had been a sensitive person the opening of the letter would have given him a shock: "Well, here I am looking over your shoulder as you read, Jimmy, lad," it began. Jim looked around and, seeing no form which could in any way be attributed to the shade of his friend, proceeded: "Though you are such a material lump of Yankee, practically, that you couldn't see me if I were offering you Von Hindy's helmet, with his head inside it. I'll bet the auld laird will have seen me by this time, and Jock, the gamekeeper, and a lot of others in the old place. But not Mary Wishart, because she's as material as you, God bless her. God bless you both.

"In time of peace prepare for war, Jimmy, old top, and by the same token, in time of war prepare for peace. That's what we've all been trying our best to do for this jolly old earth and, God help us, will do, if some weak-kneed bunch of meddling politicians don't manage to butt in and spoil it all. That *would* make some of us missing members of the mess sore, wouldn't it?

"But there's another kind of peace we fighting men ought to think about a little, my boy, and prepare for the best we can. That's an individual peace, so that when we're relieved from duty on this material plane we can chuck it and report for duty higher up. We don't want to leave any more loose ends or interests that need watching, and will keep us hanging around tormented and unhappy because there's no longer anything we can do about it. I reckon a chap that's been a good soldier—or a good civilian for that matter—and played the game won't have to wait long for his promotion, but, all the same, he might want to turn it down and rot around indefinitely if he happened to be worried about somebody that was still limbered up to impedimenta of the flesh.

"That's the way I feel about Mary Wishart, the dear lass whom I am to marry one day, if God so wills. There is no sweeter, warmer-hearted, lovelier girl walks the earth this day, Jimmy lad, and, no doubt, she loves me true. But for all that, my getting in the way of a bit of boche shrapnel or machine gun spray is no reason at all why Mary should go unloving, unloved, and unwed. I cannot see one so rich in all woman's gifts going through the long life which God may grant her a spinster. This would not be good for her evolution, *mon chèr*, nor would I wish it even if she did, which is not likely, for she is a sensible, sonsy lass and not one to repine beyond the decent interval for a red-blooded lump of brawn and bone like Donald McKinloch that loved her as strong men have loved sweet women since the world began, and not having lived to form the divine partnership of wedlock, pleads no claim to her immortal soul.

"Therefore, Jimmy, dear, since I cannot wed Mary myself and desire that she should be wed and lead her full and natural life, it is my wish that she wed you, my dearest friend, and the bravest, cleanest-hearted gentleman I ever knew."

Jim stopped reading and let his eyes rest on the shell-torn tower of the church across the square. His eyes felt hot, and there was a lump in his throat. For the moment he did actually seem almost to feel his friend's near presence. This, in an impersonal way, was the kind of philosophy he was accustomed to from Donald and used to laugh at without bothering himself to reflect upon. Well, apparently it had stood the supreme test.

"Some legacy," said Jim to himself, and smiled. "Got Liberty Bonds beat off the earth, and they take a bit of beating."

But though touched and even amused in a melancholy way, he did not take the behest very seriously. For one thing, he doubted but that he would be relieved of all responsibility in regard to it a little later when the morass of battlefields dried out a little. For another, even supposing that he were to carry it out in making a formal request for the hand of his dead friend's fiancée, the

chances were about one in a thousand of her consenting to consider herself in the light of a legacy. This, at least, is about the way the bet looked to Jim. Those who knew him, or even a stranger examining his personality as he sat there on the terrace, would have felt safe in offering far better odds.

After a moment of reflection on the fantasy, he picked up the letter and continued its perusal:

"Now, why then, laddie, am I so set that you and Mary should make a match of it? Well, then, I may as well 'fess up that my wish is not so noble and high-souled as at first sight it might appear. To be frank, it would save me a power of jealousy and bitter hate which might work ill for Mary and would be sure to react against my own peace and ghostly happiness. You know, lad, I have and share the ideas of many a wiser man than myself about the continued consciousness of those relieved from the stuffy quarters of their bodies, and I know that it would be the worst kind of impotent hell for me to see Mary in the arms of another. But were she to lie safely in yours, I would be happy at heart and, giving you both my blessing, get on about interesting myself in the rank above. And the worst of it is, Jimmy, lad, I am convinced that as sure as our own straight shooting if you do not marry her yourself she will marry the worst swine, slacker, and all-round rotter that ever claimed exemption for agricultural production; my own cousin Colin McClellan McKinloch.

"I could see the danger before ever I enlisted, Jimmy, boy, and I promised Colin the licking of his life if he so much as made eyes at Mary while I was gone, and this brings me to the second term of our agreement. If so be that he has, do you look him up and take him out and beat him into a pulp. Put a mug on him that not even the best face restorer of the army medical corps could plastic surger into the faintest semblance of a human phiz. I will be near by enjoying the fulfillment of my second behest. 'Twill be no easy job, as Colin is physically a man of my own build and has it over you by some two stone, and enjoys the use of his fists, but you will manage it. It was avarice, not cowardice, that kept him out of the war, and he is in constant training from his outdoor life, but I know the bunch of barbed wire and toluol you are inside, Jimmy, and I have no fears. I wish I could be half as sure about the first.

"Mind you now, Jimmy, in requiring these two services of you I consider myself rather as conferring a benefaction than asking one.

"And so to the third and last request which is a slight matter and concerns only that part of me which may still retain a lingering carnal appetite. You will remember my telling you how in civil life I was fond of my drop of auld peat-reek, and, on receiving my commission, swore to remain T. T. for the duration of the war, which oath, though often sorely tried, I have kept to its dismal letters. I had promised myself a wee drop or two at the end of the war, and I do not like to be bilked of it.

"Now as my investigations have seemed to indicate that a man of strong, earthly appetites does not lose them all at once on being torn roughly from his mortal envelope, and as it may be that I shall have to rot around here for some while, I would request, old top, that when you are by way of taking a drink in private you might put a little in an atomizer and spray the circumambient ether, thinking of me the time. I do not know that this will work, but it is worth the trying."

Jim understood suddenly why Donald had chuckled in writing the peculiar testament. He laughed himself, albeit with a bit of a choke. Poor old Donny! Jim had more than once observed the gleam in his eye when some of the other chaps were taking a drink after a night of freezing mud.

"There may be something in it, and again there may be not," he continued, "but the ancients poured libations to their dead and at any rate it is a cheerful thought. Do you mind the whisky advertisement of the young laird about to take his noggin while sitting in his ancestral hall and his kilted forbears stepping down from their frames upon the wall to reach for the bottle? Now, it seems to me that an atomizer might do the trick, the volatile vapor being more within the reach of a wraith. I wish to be as cheerful a ghost as may be while waiting for promotion.

"So there you are, Jim of my heart, Captain Donald McKinloch, his last living requests: to marry Mary Wishart and make her a loving and faithful husband; to punch the head of my cousin Colin, and from time to time to give my poor old ghost a ghostly drink.

"You may show this letter to Mary if you like. She is a sensible girl and will see the reasonableness of it. And so, dear lad, God bless and keep you and grant you many years of the happiness denied me through harrying the Hun.

"Donald Stuart McKinloch."

Jim scarcely knew whether laughter or tears was the proper tribute to this singular document so, to make sure, he gave a cackle of the former accompanied by the secretion of a drop or two of the latter.

One rather singular effect it had, however, and that was to make his chum seem astonishingly near. He leaned back in his chair and wondered if, after all, there might not be something in it all. Jim had never believed in such stuff, but of recent months he had stopped scoffing at it. This was becoming true of the fighting body as a whole, especially those who had been at Mons. He himself had talked with a number of sane and intelligent men whom nothing would convince that they had not seen a spirit host, though whether composed of angels or fallen warriors or the ghostly army of Jeanne d'Arc they were not prepared to say. All agreed, however, that, wherever hastily recruited, it had saved France and the allied cause.

From his brief consideration of the possible relations between the quick and the dead, Jim turned to that of the letter itself, puzzled at how much of the bizarre mixture of sense and nonsense Donald might have expected him to take seriously. There were many parts where the flippancy seemed to mask a strong and deep desire while others, such as spraying the air with alcohol on the off chance that the ethereal or astral body of his friend might find means of absorbing some of it, struck Jim as being not only fantastic, but a bit profane. Even supposing Donald's ghost to have a strong and unslaked alcoholic affinity which might be soothed in this way, it did not seem ethical to pander to it. The result might be merely to keep the restless shade hanging about like a barroom deadhead and seriously interfere with its higher evolution.

The desire for the chastisement of his cousin Colin seemed also unworthy a brave man who had just laid down his life for the cause of humanity. Carrying out such a behest would be embarrassing, also. Jim had never objected to a fight of any kind when this became incumbent, but he reflected that he would feel no end of a fool in going up to a harmless stranger and saying: "I beg your pardon, but your cousin Donald, who was killed while leading his company over the top, instructed me before his death to poke you in the jaw the first thing on my return——"

Still, these conditions could be carried out to the letter with a little personal effort. But that of marrying Miss Mary Wishart was quite a different matter, both in motive and achievement. Here again, however, Donald's object appeared to be inspired less by a desire for the lady's, or even Jim's happiness than to save his own post-mortem feelings impotent passions of jealousy and hate. Jim did not believe it possible that the two could have been very much in love. Donald's emotion must have been no more than a very powerful physical and to some extent mental attraction, otherwise he would not have relinquished so cheerfully all spiritual claims. Donald himself was only spiritual with his mind, or, to be more concise, with his reason. As for Mary, her sentiment was, no doubt, of about the same order. Jim thought it probable that her inclination might have been vacillating between Donald and Colin, but that Donald had won out by joining the colors. Donald's expressed conviction that she would marry Colin if not prevented seemed to argue this.

Much perplexed, then, as to the actual weight of his obligation, Jim read the letter through again, this time to arrive at an entirely different conclusion. Certain sincere paragraphs of the texts troubled him greatly. It read just as Donald talked; a superficial mockery covering a deeper serious intention. There could be no doubt but that Donald really believed himself destined to frequent the objects of his greatest attachments and wanted that for which he asked. And the worst of it was that, for all Jim knew, he might be right.

This thought was very disturbing, and presently it was supplemented by another which both simplified and complicated the business. Right or wrong, was not Jim as Donald's closest friend and by virtue of their agreement in duty bound to carry out his instructions to the best of his ability? If Donald had required him to clamber to the top of the pyramid of Cheops and hoot three times like an owl, Jim's blind promise would have ordained that the silly business be performed.

Wherefore with a sigh he decided that the only way to be sure would be to follow out the injunctions to the letter, and upon this he passed a resolution which was lightened by the reflection that, by the time he was in a position to act upon it, Mary would, no doubt, be married to Colin and Donald ordered to some higher plane. Jim did not believe that so fine a man and good a soldier as his chum would be left very long to wander unassigned. Such a wretched state, as he had always understood, was rather the fate of selfish, evil souls or those of infidels.

This determination to see the thing through if still alive was a great relief to Jim's mind, and his nurse appearing at that moment with a medicine glass containing the two ounces of brandy ordered for him thrice daily, he asked her kindly to set it down for him to sip at his leisure. When the girl had gone he limped to his locker and obtained a small atomizer which he had been wont to use after a gas attack. Pouring the contents of the medicine glass into the empty flask, he said: "Well, here's looking at you, Donny, old cock-o'-the-hills," and vigorously sprayed the enveloping atmosphere.

II.

In the year which followed Jim found himself so busily engaged in contingents of the enemy with which he was in touch from the material to the astral plane that he found little time to contemplate his responsibilities to a friend who might still be sojourning there. He had, however, read that part of Donald's letter to three of their mutual friends and fellow officers and, considerably to his surprise after considering the matter rather thoughtfully, one of them affirmed that there might be something in it as he had once read in a treatise on theosophy that entities of the astral plane were still to some extent material and able to absorb certain physical emanations. He advised, therefore, that Jim be cautious with the atomizer lest it interfere with Donald's promotion.

Then, in the early spring of 1918, Jim got his disabling wound, and the D. S. C. Three months of blighty followed, but it did not matter much as the heel of his right foot and the elbow of his left arm had been shorn away and his fighting days were over.

In due time Jim was honorably discharged and resumed civilian habits and apparel. Proceeding then to New York to attend to some matters of business, he found himself presently back in his old haunts but with a curious sense of detachment and nervous restlessness. It seemed impossible that he could ever resume his former purposeless existence. For one thing it belonged to conditions which no longer appeared to exist, and, even if they had, he would not have wanted them. Most of his old associates were scattered, the great majority of them in some form of war service, several dead, and all extremely busy. Jim cursed the bad luck which had almost put him hors de combat and wondered what he was going to do with himself.

The war appeared to be tottering on its last legs. It was still painful for him to walk, and his left arm was ankylosed at a right angle, useful enough for the ordinary things, as he could flex though not extend it. Otherwise he was in splendid physical shape, but mentally in a most unaccustomed state of nervous depression and irritability. There seemed to be absolutely nothing in sight which was in the slightest degree worth while.

It was then that, for the first time, he began to think seriously of his agreement with Donald and to see in it instead of a farcical and perfunctory duty a possibly interesting adventure. He had not the slightest fear in the world that Mary Wishart, if still unmarried, would take seriously his formal offer of matrimony, but he decided to make it if only to satisfy his conscience, which was exacting about some things. And then, picking up the morning paper, he was startled to read that Miss Mary Wishart, of the Canadian Red Cross, had just arrived from France on four months' sick leave to recover from wounds and shell shock received in the bombing of a base hospital where she was serving as a nurse. "Miss Wishart," read the paragraph, "expects to spend a part of the summer at the country home of Mr. and Mrs. Doremus Gibbons, at Roslyn, L. I."

Acting on the impulse of the moment, Jim went to the telephone and called up Mrs. Gibbons, a lifelong friend, and asked if he might run out in his car for luncheon. He received in reply a summary command to run out for the week's end and as much longer as he might be free to manage. It seemed to Jim, as he told the club valet to pack his things, that the shades of Donald must still be active on the astral plane. He had long since discontinued the atomized

libations, but now, seized by the whim of the moment, he took his flask, poured some brandy into an atomizer, and sprayed it vigorously in front of the electric fan which was doing its best to whip the humid heat into some activity. The only appreciable reaction from this kind thought was on the valet who, entering at this moment with some clothes, showed symptoms of being gassed as he struck the tainted gale.

Jim had his car brought around from the garage, then dismissed the chauffeur and drove out alone. He had formed the habit of doing everything for himself which he could decently accomplish, and, although a bit awkward for him to drive a car, which he had bought shortly before the war and had scarcely made acquaintance with, he managed fairly well. Immediately on starting he found that his brakes were working badly, the hand brake gripping and that of the foot too loose, making its control particularly difficult and even painful owing to his damaged heel. The big car was by no means under perfect control, and ordinarily Jim would have driven directly to the garage and had the brakes adjusted, but he had been late in starting, and the low barometer and sweltering heat threatened some sort of violent eruption, so he held on his way without stopping and with the exercise of greater care than made driving a pleasure.

It was an intensely disagreeable day, not only because of the high temperature and humidity, but owing to the low pressure which seemed to leave one's nerves unsustained; one of those days when lovers squabble and good dogs snap and it is necessary to double the guard in the insane asylums. Jim, whose nerves had been irritable enough recently, felt the low tension even in the strong, artificial draft which he created, and his wounds were tender, especially the remnant of heel on the foot controlling the brake.

Both brakes had been steadily getting worse and likewise Jim's nerves, what with the strain of constant watchfulness and the increasing soreness of his heel. He had been driving fast, for the pervading murk was growing blacker in the west and promised some sort of atmospheric explosion before very long. He could not tell how soon it might burst, and was in a hurry to arrive and have the disagreeable run over with. All of the traffic seemed imbued with the same idea, and it had been unpleasant going through towns. Even his gas engine seemed to have a grouch, and was firing fitfully owing to poor carburetion.

The Gibbons estate was a large one and, after skirting Roslyn, Jim, who had been out there several times before, happened to remember a short cut which would cut out a hill and take him in the back way. This was scarcely more than a lane winding between a thick growth of scrub pines and, coming to it presently, Jim turned in regardless of a small sign which said, "Private Way. Motor Cars Forbidden." He considered himself a privileged character and that the peculiar circumstances warranted an infraction of proprietary rules. But when one disobeys one should exercise a certain caution, and Jim did not, so that, as he coasted down a steep little dip with a curve at the bottom, he pitched suddenly on a pair of equestrians walking their horses in the same direction.

Jim horned and did his best to brake without taking a skid, observing, as he did so, that the pair, a man and a girl, were riding very close together and that the man, a broad-shouldered chap in shirtwaist and loud checked riding breeches, was about to venture some sort of amorous tentative. His arm was, in fact, half raised as Jim burst in upon them.

And then came trouble. The girl, who was smartly costumed and riding astride, reined her horse off the lane, which was at this point very narrow. The man on the contrary pulled up short, squarely in the middle and looked back over his shoulder with a scowl. His face was long and rather narrow and struck Jim as being familiar. There was no room to pass, the foot brake was slipping, and Jim, in desperation, threw in the hand one which promptly gripped, locking both wheels. The track was sandy, and the heavy car slid along a few feet and came to a stop but not quite soon enough, as the radiator, which was hot, touched the fretting horse's rump.

None but a masterly horseman could have kept his seat as the startled, high-strung hunter bounded into the air. Even then it was touch and go for a moment, and Jim rather expected to see the rider in a treetop before he got his mount in hand. The girl, a little ahead, drew rein and turned when Jim saw, to his surprise, that she wore a tulle veil which, though the day was stifling, entirely hid her face. She was a straight, full-

bosomed girl with dark, wavy hair, but Jim was for the moment more interested in her escort, who had got control of his horse and turned on Jim white to the ears with fury.

"Ye damned idiot——" he rasped, in a harsh, strident voice. "Can ye not read? What right have ye bucketin' through a forbidden way in your filthy gas wagon?"

"I'm sorry," Jim answered. "My brakes have gone bad. All the same, I would not have touched you if you hadn't reined back into me."

"Y're a dirty liar. Ye thought to get me off, ye blighter," he spurred to the side off the car. "This will teach ye to mind your step," and before Jim could realize the vicious intention the bamboo riding crop whistled through the air and came down with a savage cut which glanced from the side of his head and struck him on the shoulder.

"Colin!" cried a muffled voice, and the girl spurred forward. The man might have struck again, but his horse flung up its head and backed away.

Jim snapped off the current and slid out from under the wheel. The gathering murk seemed suddenly to change its hue from venous blue to a lurid, throbbing red. His cap had been knocked off by the blow and his lean, square face was white to the roots of his curly, chestnut hair. Standing in the road beside the car he tried twice before able to speak, and then his voice was like the croak of a raven.

"Get down, you mucker, and take your licking," he managed to say.

The gleam in the pale eyes was almost exultant. "Now I will just oblige ye, me lad." Colin slipped from his horse and handed the rein to the girl. " 'Tis not often one has the pleasure of thrashin' a road hog." He pushed back his cuffs and advanced on Jim, and he was a formidable figure of a man with his broad shoulders, deep chest, and long, powerful arms. They were not so badly matched to the casual eye; about of a height and weight and approximately the same age, which was thirty-one or two. Both had the look of hard, out-of-door men in the full flush of their strength. Their faces were widely different in feature and expression, that of the horseman being rather long and narrow though with a heavy-angled jaw and pointed chin while Jim's was more square, with straight nose, widely spaced eyes, prominent cheek bones, and a more generous mouth. Colin's expression was one of exultant ferocity. He looked like some wild Pict from the hills about to fall upon an hereditary foe with claymore and skene dhu.

But for all his savagery the man's face was vacant as compared to the peculiar deathly, expressionless mask which confronted him and the significance of which he failed to understand. It was that face which comes only to men who for a lapse have laid aside their souls to slay until slain in a vortex of horrors. It is the cosmic war face, and the intelligence behind it is for the time devoid of all emotion, perhaps even that of hate or blood lust. It is the trained killer's face, and it does not react to any consciousness of ruth or fear or mercy or even glut, merely because these qualities are in abeyance. This terrible war face would not be recognized by most; its fearsome abstraction would escape or deceive even an enemy until he gazed upon it for a brief instant with the bayonet through his breast.

So now it deceived Colin, who was wont to battle with normal-looking folk and mistook this for a sort of apathy of shock. But the mounted girl saw it differently.

"Don't, Colin—don't!" she cried sharply. "Can't you see? He means to kill you!"

"Does he, now?" cried Colin mockingly. "Then the white-jowled blighter had best get right about it," and he sprang in with a quick, jabbing feint. A withering straight punch of the left was behind it. Jim blocked this with the heavy bony callous of his ankylosed elbow and Colin gasped with pain. It numbed his fist for a moment, and Jim, pivoting, drove his right into the mouth, gashing his knuckles and rocking the man's strong, even teeth. He might have followed it with the left in a swing at the jaw which, if it had landed, would have finished the fight then and there, but the reach was lacking in his bent arm.

Then for a moment the fighting was close and vicious, both men scorning to spar and satisfied with give and take. Neither attempted to clinch. Jim was trying with a cold and unemotional doggedness to maneuver an uppercut to the chin which might let in all the force of his big subscapular muscles, and presently he achieved it, though with too short a hook to more than jar his adversary. Both were cut and bleeding, both breathing in labored gasps, but both

were men of heavy bony frame able to support the cruel battering.

Jim's lack of heel was no appreciable handicap. It may, perhaps, have been even an advantage, its absence having given greater strength and spring to the muscular calf. Colin's rage was beginning to abate under the punishment and the growing knowledge that he had got to use his head. He was an experienced boxer, and Jim's persistent refusal to use a straight jab of the left began to bother him. Two or three times he had ducked in expectation of it, and now began to think that there was some deep guile behind it; something which was being saved up for him. He grew a little wary, and Jim taunted him in cold, contemptuous tones.

"Better get your crop, slacker," he croaked through his gashed lips. "Try the loaded end."

The girl spurred forward, but her horse refused to thrust itself against the striking figures. Perhaps it was frightened by the scent of fresh blood. "Stop it!" she cried "That's enough—stop it!"

Suddenly she brought her own crop down on the horse's quivering flank and it sprang forward, striking Jim with its shoulder. The girl's intention was not unfair. She wanted only to separate these two stubborn battlers. But the shove spoiled Jim's balance, and Colin was quick to profit by it in a full swing at the right jaw. Jim dropped his head and caught it on the side of the forehead which Colin's seal ring gashed to the bone. Jim was sent reeling by the sheer weight of the blow and, as he recovered himself, dazed and nearly stunned, he seemed to see the broad back of a man in khaki who stepped between Colin and himself. Colin must have seen it, too, for he stooped and stood for a brief instant, staring wildly.

"Wha—what——" he cried, then drew his bleeding knuckles across his eyes. Jim did the same. His own eyes were nearly closed, but when he looked again he saw only Colin facing him with a bewildered look. The girl's horse snorted, sprang violently backward, and stood shivering and sweating. There came a sudden heavy crash of thunder and a cold draft of air swept through the pines.

"Seein' things, are you?" Jim taunted. "Come to it, swine. I'll show you something with flesh and bone."

"You saw—saw——"

"I see something yellow. Here's where you get it——"

He clenched his teeth which were loosened in their sockets, and lurched forward. Colin snarled in his throat and struck a heavy blow which reached Jim's cheek. Another struck him on the mouth, but glanced downward. And then, seeing that he rocked unsteadily with no effort to strike back, Colin sprang in to finish it, and gave Jim the chance for which he had been waiting. He dropped his left shoulder, the stiffened elbow far back, the left fist almost to his knee. Then up it came in a terrific swinging jab, the rotation from the waist and all the power of loin and back to drive it. With the precision of a calculation in gunnery it landed squarely under Colin's jaw between its angle and the point of the chin, and that was the end of the world for Colin. It is extremely doubtful if he ever felt the blow at all.

III.

Jim sat on the step of his car and peered at the girl through the slits in his billowing eyelids. She had slipped from the saddle, and, throwing the reins of the two bridles over a branch, was now examining the pulpy mass of what had so few minutes before been her haughty cavalier.

Jim knew, of course, that she was Mary Wishart. He had guessed that even before he had brought his car to a stop. Watching her now, he was also able to guess why she wore the tulle veil, and it sent a little shiver through him. Something had happened her face in the bombing by the Hun of that hospital. Perhaps it had been blown away.

It struck him now that her examination of Colin's unconscious body, or corpse, whichever it might be, was hardly of the sort which a girl would tender that of a fiancé. There was no indication of shock or shrinking, which in a nurse one naturally would not expect, but neither was there the slightest hint of personal solicitude, or even that touch of gentle sympathy which Jim had so often observed in the most experienced of war nurses when caring for the wounded. She seemed to Jim to be overhauling the prostrate Colin a good deal as a person might rake over a rubbish heap to see if there was anything worth saving.

There came a terrific crash of thunder and another sudden puff of cool wind. Jim

saw that the storm might burst upon them at any moment. It did not concern him in the least for himself. He had fought with hand grenade and bayonet straight through the course of similar ones, scarcely remarking their existence. Neither did it matter about his late adversary, whether he happened to be still alive or not. Jim had seen thousands of better men than Colin, both living and dead, exposed to the fury not only of heaven, but of hell and for days on end instead of hours.

No, the storm was of purely minor importance to himself and even less to Colin, because if the brute were dead he could not feel it and if alive it might fetch him round. But his sense of chivalry dictated that Mary Wishart must be got in out of it. Such a thunderstorm as promised to burst upon them at any moment could not possibly be good for a nurse convalescing from wounds and shell shock. The Gibbon's house was only about a mile distant, and it seemed to Jim that the best thing to do under the circumstances would be to put up the hood and side curtains, take the two of them aboard and drive in, sending a groom after the horses, which were sheltered by the pines to some extent. It was awkward, though, the car being a runabout.

His head was rocking drunkenly, and he could scarcely see through the swollen pouches around his eyes while his hands were frightfully gashed and bruised, but he got up and set about rigging out the hood and curtains. Mary Wishart rose from the ground at Colin's side and stared at him for a moment from behind the ambush of her veil, then, observing his fumbling efforts, she walked slowly over to the car.

"Is he dead?" Jim asked indifferently.

"No, but he's not far from it. I don't think that he ought to be moved. Can't you move the car ahead a little so as to shelter him?"

"Yes," Jim answered shortly. He felt a cold anger for the girl, because he thought that she had tried to ride him down. "You might help me with the top."

A sudden violent gust of wind threatened to wrench it away as they secured it. The wind was coming before the rain. Then, just as they had got all fast, a blinding thunderbolt hissed down out of the blackness overhead and struck somewhere close by. The horses neighed and reared, then bolted off down the lane in the direction of their stable.

"That will fetch somebody from the house." Mary said.

Jim did not answer. He secured the curtains on the weather side, then got aboard, started the motor and moved ahead a few feet, placing the car in such a manner as to shelter the unconscious man.

"Cover him with the spare curtains and get in," said Jim. "Here comes the rain."

Mary Wishart did as he directed. With a fury which threatened to uproot the straggling pines and tear away the hood the small, local cyclone burst upon them to the accompaniment of deafening and almost continuous thunder while the lightning blazed and crackled and seemed literally to play about the car. Conversation would have been almost impossible, even if they had desired it, which was far from the wish of either. Jim held his handkerchief between the curtains and, when it was soaked, sponged the blood from his battered face. Colin's ring had left some ugly gashes which would have been better for a stitch here and there, but the bleeding quickly ceased.

On the ground at the side and partially protected by the running board, Colin remained plunged in oblivion. Jim suffered no anxiety. For one thing he did not greatly care what might come of it, and for another he felt that whatever did was fully deserved. The man had invited accident. Jim knew also that after such a fearful knock-out blow near the base of the jaw the brain concussion might render a man unconscious for hours.

He himself, hardened by over three years of terrific campaign, was now feeling not much the worse for the encounter. Then, as his brain began to work more freely, he was suddenly struck by the bizarre element of the encounter and the curious way in which fate had worked out the fulfillment of his promise. Reflecting on this, he thought of his confused impression of a man in khaki stepping in front of him while reeling and ready to go down under the impact of Colin's blows delivered before he could regain his balance destroyed by Mary's horse. Could Donald have managed to materialize for the fraction of a second needed to save him from defeat?

Colin certainly appeared to have seen something in the nature of a prodigy. Jim wondered if Mary Wishart had seen it, too, and decided to ask. The storm was now less violent and talk was possible.

"Tell me something, Miss Wishart," said he. "When McKinloch jumped in to finish it just after you tried to ride me down——"

"I did not try to ride you down," she interrupted hotly. "I tried to ride between you. What do you think I am?"

"I beg your pardon." Jim turned and tried to see her face but could not in the gloom. "I'm afraid I did you an injustice."

"You certainly did, if that is what you thought. I wanted to stop the fight, because I saw that there was something wrong with your arm and I was afraid you were going to get the worst of it. Who are you? How do you happen to know my name?"

"I was coming down here principally to meet you," Jim answered. "Lucy Gibbons is an old friend——"

Mary Wishart gripped his bruised arm so that it hurt. "You are not Jim Davies—Donald's chum!" she cried.

"I am, though."

"But they told me that you had been badly wounded—all shot to pieces!"

"So I was. That's why I couldn't put up a better fight. All the same, I think I'd have managed to muddle through, even without Donald's help."

"Donald's help?" Her voice was breathless.

"Yes. At least, I don't see who else it could have been. Somebody stepped between us for a second—just long enough to let me get myself together. Colin saw him, I think. Didn't you?"

"I—I don't know." Her voice was faint. "It seemed to me that there was—something—a shadow—ah—he's coming round."

There came a sigh from the ground, followed by a choking cough. The electric storm had thundered past with its cyclonic squall, and there was a clear, golden streak low in the western sky, but it was still raining hard. Mary and Jim looked down and saw Colin's face, if face it could be called, turned vacantly up at them.

"Well, how do you feel now?" Jim asked curtly.

Colin struggled to his feet and stood swaying. He gripped the edge of the car. His eyes were worse than Jim's and nose and lips an awful sight. He thrust forward his head and peered at Jim, then looked around.

"Y'are useful with your fists," he mumbled, "and ye can stand the punishment. But ye had help."

"Help from whom?" Mary asked.

He lowered his voice. "Donald. Did ye not see him?"

"I did," said Jim, "but you lie when you say he helped—or, if he did, it was only for a second to let me get set and keep you from profiting by a foul. If you've got any doubt you can try again two weeks from now."

Colin shook his head. "You are Davies," he said, "Donald's chum; and you have shamed me between the two of ye. I would have been shamed if I had beat, because y'are not a sound man. I did wrong to lose my temper. It serves me right."

From close by came the sound of a Klaxon and a big limousine pushed out between the pines. It came to a stop, and the chauffeur stared at them with wonder.

"Will you drive me to the house, Major Davies?" Mary asked.

"I was about to ask the privilege. There is something very important which I have come down here to say to you and, the sooner it is said, the better." He started the motor and the car began to move away. Neither of them so much as looked at Colin, who was walking unsteadily toward the limousine.

"I think that I know what it is," Mary said. "A promise to Donald. A mutual benefit pact made between you two—and Donald has won."

"That depends upon your answer. If it is 'yes,' then I have won. If it is 'no,' then you have won. But I do not quite see how Donald can win in either case, unless it is by proxy, and that was not at all his idea."

"Hadn't you better reflect a little?" Mary asked.

"I have already done so. Miss Wishart, this bruised, maimed, and quarrelsome ex-soldier has the honor to ask your hand in marriage."

Mary bowed. "Major Davies," said she, "I beg to express my sincere appreciation of the honor done me and to accept it with respect and gratitude."

For some reason this answer was precisely what Jim had expected, though for the life of him he could not have said why. And then suddenly the solution occurred to him, and he felt a wild desire to shout with laughter. Beside him Mary's shoulders were moving slightly and Jim glanced at her with suspicion.

"Miss Wishart," said he severely, "your

acceptance of my offer fills me with the most profound emotions of joy and—and——"

"Astonishment, not unmixed with apprehension," Mary supplied.

"Precisely. Astonishment that you should deign so to honor such a useless member of society and apprehension lest he should prove unworthy. But I should very much like to know when the dickens you made *your* pact with sly old Donald. God bless him and give him his promotion soon."

"So you've guessed, major? Well, it was soon after I got up to the front. I'd let him know that I was somewhere thereabouts, and we were getting shelled all the time, and gassed and air-raided to say nothing of the danger from infection in our work, so when he suggested that we each agree to carry out three wishes of the other if that one got killed, I agreed. It seemed to me a perfect good bet. You see, major, Donald and I were awfully fond of each other and, no doubt, would have married some time after the war. But we were never actually in love with each other, as in that case neither of us would have left the other as a sort of legacy."

"Then you did that with Donald?"

"Yes. I left him to my dearest friend; an English nurse in the hospital. He'd have married her. And almost any girl would have been glad to marry Donald."

"Then you have been expecting me for some time?"

"Of course, major, dear—and awfully afraid you might be killed. It is splendid of you to be so loyal and true to your promise and ask in marriage a girl whose face you have never seen and may find not at all to your taste, sir."

"Don't talk about faces. I hope you got a good look at mine and can fix it in your memory for a few days. What happened yours? Wounds?"

"The wounds were nothing much. It was the mustard gas that did the business—there, now are you not sorry that you spoke so quickly, sir?"

"No. I'm glad. Donald and other things aside there is something about you which attracts me tremendously. I think that we belong to the same guild, you and I. We have 'drunk the fire,' as the French say."

"That is true, major. One is rather different from other folk when one has walked around with Death for days on end and seen him take his heavy toll on every side. We take things more rationally and, instead of being shocked and startled by fights and ghosts and sudden proposals of marriage, we find them interesting. You see, major, we have come to crave the violent and unexpected." She glanced back over her shoulder. "The limousine is not following. It is likely that Colin has told the driver to take him back to town. He has just come East on business, and Lucy asked him out for the week's end. He is a proud man and would not wish to face the folk in such a state. Donald would have made a joke of it." She sighed.

"Donald would never have done such a beastly thing," Jim said.

The stables appeared ahead, for they were entering the place from the rear. Jim drove around to the front of the house and, as he drew up under the porte-cochère, a pretty woman ran out and greeted them in a breathless manner which told of intense anxiety.

"Jim——" she cried, "what's happened you? Have you had an accident? Oh, my dear—your face—is there anything broken?" she turned to an elderly English butler who had followed her out. "Saunders, telephone for Doctor Sutton. Where is Mr. McKinloch?"

"Gone back to town, I think," Mary answered. "It's all right, Lucy, dear. There is nothing to be in the least excited about. All that happened was that Jim brushed Colin's horse with his car, and Colin slashed Jim over the head with his crop, so they both got down and fought it out, and I rode into Jim and Colin tried to take advantage of it, but Donald's ghost stepped in between, and Jim knocked Colin senseless for half an hour, and Colin came to and went back to town in the car you sent, and Jim has asked me to marry him and I've accepted, so we're open to congratulations——"

IV.

The elderly butler had served for a span of years in an English family in which were five young sons with sportsmanlike tastes, and he proved himself so expert as a face restorer that the doctor was dispensed with. Much can be done with a face when the raw material is good, and Jim's was both raw and good.

To Parker, Jim explained the nature of the conflict, leaving out Donald's part of it, and the butler's gratification was extreme.

"Mr. McKinloch appeared a ver'ry 'aughty man, sir," said he, "and a good grueling can do 'im no 'arm. You s'y you got 'im with a left 'ook from the knee, sir? Ah, that never f'ils to do the job, sir, when it lands."

"Speaking of faces, Parker," said Jim, "is Miss Wishart very badly disfigured?"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Is Miss Wishart much disfigured? She told me that she was badly burned with mustard gas. Have you seen her face, or does she always wear her veil?"

Parker turned suddenly to cough. "Oh, Miss Wishart's fyce, sir. Well, it's *'ardly* what one would call disfigured, sir—though from what I've 'eard say it must 'ave been shocking bad for a bit. No, sir, she only wears her v'il when she goes h'out, 'er eyes being still sensitive, like. If there's nothing more, sir, I'll go see about the dinner. The bell is on the head of the bed, sir."

He went out with his tray of first-aid paraphernalia, and Jim flung himself down in a morris chair to reflect on the singular events of the afternoon. So here he was engaged to be married to a girl whom he scarcely knew and could not make out at all, yet to whom he felt already most curiously and strongly drawn.

What puzzled him most was her prompt readiness to accept an offer of marriage from an absolute stranger whom she knew to be making it solely in fulfillment of a pledge. That she was herself similarly pledged to accept was not sufficient explanation. The whole thing was unreasonable and absurd. He wondered if she could be one of those practical persons in whom what appeared to be material advantage dictated to sentiment and such emotions as lead to individual selection of a mate.

Jim had more modesty and far less vanity than the average man, but his sense of proportion was too well balanced for him to belittle what he had to offer. He knew that his social rating as an eligible *parti* would be high. He was of excellent family connections, rich, with no dependencies and a splendid war record, young, well-liked and —as Mary Wishart had seen recent proof—physically able-bodied. Almost anybody would say that an unattached girl must be a fool to refuse him.

And yet, although he would not admit it, for a girl to catch a man "right off the bat" and hang on to him in such an unembarrassed way seemed to him indelicate. Possibly her circumstances might be such that it was highly desirable for her to marry a man so situated as he; perhaps she was ambitious or tired of spinsterhood or her facial disfigurement might be of a sort to interfere with matrimony, or all of these things. He did not believe that her farcical agreement with Donald had much to do with it, except possibly as a romantic excuse.

Well, anyhow, he had made his offer and was determined to see the business through, come what might of it. He wished that Lucy Gibbons would come up to see how he was getting on, so that he might quiz her a little. For a moment he was tempted to ring and ask for her, but pride forbade. He decided to insist upon an early, if not an immediate date for their nuptials and see what Mary Wishart would say to that. At any rate, he reflected rather grimly, she had three strong assets about which there could be no question; strong, fearless good sense, a fine war record of her own and, barring possibly her facial disfigurement, as superb a feminine physical being as he had ever seen. Jim most admired the female type which could not by any possible effort disguise its sex in male attire. And there was also Donald's unqualified praise.

Parker had laid out his things, and when it was almost dinner time Jim dressed and went down. There were only Mrs. Gibbons, her mother, Mary Wishart, and himself, Mr. Gibbons having gone recently to France on an errand of the Red Cross while the seventeen and nineteen-year-old boys were in the service of the coast-patrol fleet. There was nobody about, so Jim took a solid stick from the rack and stepped out into the sunken gardens which were fresh and sweet after the shower.

The sun was very low and its crimson rays swept the place with flat waves of pulsing color through which the individual notes of bright, old-fashioned flowers gleamed out wet and sparkling like strewn jewels. The lawns were sewn with diamond dust and even the pebbly paths seemed made of semiprecious stones. In the center of the sunken quadrangle was a little *temple d'amour*, slightly raised and with white and red rose ramblers spraying its columns. Jim strolled toward this, limping rather more than usual, and, as he went up the three marble steps, saw Mary at the farther end of the path beyond. She looked up and waved the bou-

quet she was gathering, then came toward him.

Jim's heart, heretofore steady enough before going over the top, whirred off like an airplane motor. Mary was still wearing the blue tulle veil, but as she approached he saw that it was of a lighter shade, and hoped that he might be able to see through it. But this proved a vain ambition, for it was twice folded and impenetrable as a Turkish yashmak.

As she came up the steps and paused at the top she reminded Jim of some allegoric figure in a pageant. There was a symbolic quality in the poise of her beautiful body with its small head held high with ruddy bronze hair which was rippled like the water in a fountain, and in the sweep of her full bosom and wide, womanly hips. She presented the sort of heroic figure which might have depicted the woman of an era; the new France, still veiled of face from recent scars.

But there was no consciousness of this in her manner, for she gave a little laugh, and said: "I think you could do with a veil yourself, sir. And how are you feeling, now that you have had a chance to think it all over?"

"I am feeling better," Jim answered. "How soon will you marry me, Mary Wishart?"

"Oh, dear." She tilted her head a little to the side, then looked back over her shoulder at the sun. Its lower edge was just kissing the hilltops. "And the man has not yet seen my face. Now there is real chivalry—and courage."

Jim stepped forward, took her hand, and raised it to his bruised lips. "I am a soldier, lady mine, and honorable scars have no terrors for me. Will you marry me a month from to-day?"

The bouquet slipped from her hands and fell on the flags. Mary looked down at it, her beautiful arms hanging straight at her sides.

"I take off my veil at sunset," said she. "That will be in about thirty seconds. Had you not better wait, sir? Think how dreadful it would be to spend your life looking at a face which was not to your liking."

"I have your promise, Mary Wishart," said Jim, "and I mean to hold you to it. I am not asking *if* you will marry me, but *when*."

"Look, sir," said Mary. "The sun has set."

Still holding the veil with its edge stretched on a level with the top of her forehead, Mary Wishart turned slowly and faced him. She hesitated, as if afraid to let it fall. Jim drew a quick breath and braced himself to meet the shock. His dread had not the slightest taint of selfishness. It was not the fear of having linked his life to a spectacle of daily shuddering contemplation. The anguish of that moment was all for Mary; the passionate resentment against this thing of beauty having suffered defacement, if only for folk of shallow vision. Her body as she came up the path with her chiffon costume whipped back by the fresh west wind had reminded him of the Winged Victory, headless, but filled with the rush of strong air, and now his soul protested at the mutilation of such a perfect creature.

So, as the veil fell, he could scarcely see for an instant what had been disclosed. And then, for a moment, he could see only her eyes which were dark and tender and screened by a double fringe of long, dark lashes. He was prepared for almost anything but the exquisite loveliness of the ravishing face with its faint, delicate flush and of a texture which seemed impalpable, like the flower face of a very young child. Not only was there not the slightest blemish of any sort but in feature and complexion it was ethereal, a dream face, saved only from spiritual impossibility by its endearing seduction.

One's idea of angel faces is of a classic sort, spiritual and fine but not with any appeal to the material senses. But this was not the case in that of Mary's. The low, wide brow, mischievous eyes, straight, low-bridged nose with its retroussé tip, wide mouth with its full, pink lips set at the slightest suspicion of a slant, all would have tempted a prophet, an archangel, a demigod—though these last we fear required no great amount of tempting—a soldier with a vigil which honor compels that he shall not quit.

It was all too much for poor Jim, and the greatest moral strength he ever showed, perhaps, was in not showing its employment at that moment. He turned rather pale, but the sunset glow was against his face. Mary may have got a little of what he was feeling. She leaned forward with a smile.

"Poor Jim, you look dreadfully done in. Don't stand." She seated herself on the

marble bench and drew him down at her side. "Does my new face please you?"

"Your *new* face—— I don't believe I understand. That veil—why do you wear it? I thought you must be disfigured."

"It was a close call. I was frightfully burned with mustard gas. We were getting the wounded out and there was no time to hunt for my mask. They thought I was going to be blind. My whole face was one horrible sore. But it turned out to be superficial and healed without leaving so much as a crinkle and the skin is all new, even the conjunctiva of my eyes."

"I see. That is what makes it so soft and fine, like a baby's."

"Yes. And it has been frightfully tender, and my eyes sensitive to light and a draft of air. That is why I have had to wear the veil when I go out."

Jim drew a deep breath and stole a shy glance at her lovely profile. "I'm glad I didn't know," he muttered. "I would not have dared——"

"But I would. You see, Jim, it wasn't as though you had been a stranger. I had been thinking of you a lot since Donald was killed and hearing a great deal about you, and everything that I heard was so splendid. Then Lucy has told me more. Then, there was my promise to Donald, and I knew that he had yours, too. Something seemed to keep suggesting you to my mind—Donald, perhaps. And Colin was threatening to be such a dominant pest! He had always ridden roughshod over my will. Everybody was afraid of him—and when you knocked him senseless with your terrible, wounded arm I felt as though I had been rescued and was your prize."

"You are. It would have made no difference if your sweet face had been one ghastly wreck."

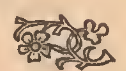
Mary looked at him with glowing eyes. "Don't you suppose I felt that, sir? It went through me almost like a pain. It made me feel afraid. Oh, my dear, I understand—that I am going to—— I—I want to kiss your poor swollen lips——"

Presently, with her head against his chest and his arms holding her close, he felt her body vibrate. She gasped and gripped his shoulder.

"Jim—oh, Jim——"

"Sweetheart——"

"He—he is standing there. Look—he is smiling. His lips are moving. He seems to say 'Good-by—God bless you.' There—he has gone——"



Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of THE POPULAR MAGAZINE, published semimonthly, at New York, N. Y., for April 1, 1920:

State of New York, County of New York, (*ss.*)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared George C. Smith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Treasurer of Street & Smith Corporation, pnbiishers of THE POPULAA MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the hest of his knowlcdge and belief, a trne statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenne, New York, N. Y.; *editor*, Charles A. MacLean, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *managing editors*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *business managers*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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GEORGE C. SMITH, Treasurer,
of Street & Smith Corporation, puhlishers.

Sworn to and subscrihed before me this 25th day of March, 1920. Franois S. Duff, Notary Puhlic, No. 239, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1921.)

A Chat With You

EVER since the dawn of time, in spite of many apparent defeats and setbacks, mankind has been moving forward into a freer and happier world. And yet, during the whole period, we are tolerably sure that each generation looked back upon the time past as a golden age and lamented the degeneracy of its own days. The good old days! It is an appealing phrase, and yet it doesn't mean nearly as much as it sounds, and if we could get back into some of these old days we might wish ourselves well out of them. The days of low prices, the days of the horse, the days of the bicycle, the days of the sailing vessel—above all, the days when every young man had a chance to wind up as a millionaire.

IT is the last item in the list that interests us most. Frankly we believe that the best two stories in the world are the one about the young man who is out hunting a fortune whether in the form of buried treasure or stock in a motor corporation, and the other story about the young man who is in love with a perfect peach and who has to fight to get her.

We don't want the young man who gets the fortune to degenerate into a mere historical character. We want him to continue with us in the flesh, daily and yearly repeating his exploit and furnishing the material for new stories. If it were true that, as some of the admirers of the past say, all the chances had disappeared nowadays, we would feel discouraged. But it is not true. No one knows as yet how many millionaires were made overnight during the war. But let us quote some one who really knows something about millionaires and how the millions are made. The following is from a recent article by Roger Babson, the famous statistician:

"Two years ago I made a study of the heads of the one hundred leading industries of America. Those men are all multimillionaires and leaders in their industry. Five per cent of them are sons of bankers. Ten per cent of them are sons of merchants and manufacturers, twenty-five per cent of them are the sons of teachers, doctors, and country lawyers, and over thirty per cent of them are the sons of preachers whose salaries didn't average fifteen hundred dollars a year."

BANKERS, merchants, and manufacturers are by no means all rich or even prosperous. For one Morgan there are hundreds of small country bankers whose total turnover is very modest indeed. For one Marshall Field there are tens of thousands of small merchants who even in times of prosperity may be described as struggling. For one Ford there are thousands of independent manufacturers who are far from rich, as riches go these days. But admitting that the whole fifteen per cent of them are well off, the other eighty-five per

cent must have sent their sons out into the world with no heritage at all, save the only really valuable heritage that any man is permitted by nature to receive—health, brains, and a good education. What becomes of the sons of the rich men? Nobody knows. Ask the chorus girls, the waiters in cafés, the merchants of fake oil stocks. We hope some day Mr. Babson will take the time to find out definitely and let us know.

THIS is good news. In spite of those who would try to persuade us that life is a battle of one class against another, it goes to show that we all belong to one big class. That Americans are not stratified into various layers, that the pot is still bubbling, and it is still possible for any one to get to the top. Also we may rest assured that in spite of numerous rather glaring exceptions, the men who get to the top generally deserve to get there. None of them arrive without the ability to save money, to seize opportunity, to look ahead, and to work hard. It isn't greed that gets a man on, it is the willingness and ability to give other men something they want, whether in work or brains or manufactures or inventions.

THE novel which opens the next issue of THE POPULAR is a story of business and money making. It is a tale of the automobile industry and a moving picture in words of the newest of our great cities—Detroit. It is called "The Detour," and was written by L. H. Robbins. Perhaps you will recognize some of the characters in it. If you happen to live in Detroit you will be almost sure to. There are more facts tucked away in this story than in many special articles.

ALSO in the next issue of THE POPULAR you will find the first big installment of the greatest mystery and detective story of the year. It will be complete in three parts. The author is Eden Phillpotts, already famous as a writer in another field. This is his first attempt in the way of a mystery story, and it is a refreshing surprise. We sat up late to read the manuscript and it was worth it. "The Gray Room," it is called. We challenge any one to solve the mystery till he has read to the last. We challenge any one to drop the story after he has read the first installment.

THERE is a live baseball story in the next number by Michael J. Phillips. There is a story of the wildcat oil wells by J. E. Grinstead. There are stories by Knibbs, Bertrand Sinclair, Stacpoole, Rothvin Wallace, and others. We have often suggested in the past that you order your copy of THE POPULAR from the news dealer in advance. It is still a good suggestion.





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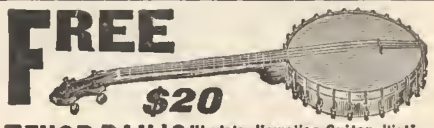
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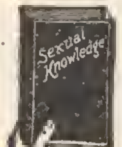
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Made of full round fibre reed woven over steel stakes, and not the ordinary flat reed usually used in carriages at this price. Made in either beautiful gray with gray gear or natural finish with black gear. Has Bedford cord rear windshield and Bedford cord upholstery. Gear is stationary type, tubular construction, ⅜-in. in diameter. Steel wheels measure 14 in. in diameter and fitted with ½-inch rubber tires and nickel plated hub caps. Inside width, 14 inches. Easy riding springs; excellent, comfortable upholstery. Shipping weight, about 75 lbs.

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THE CHARLES E. HIRES COMPANY, PHILADELPHIA
Hires contains juices of 16 roots, barks, herbs and berries
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This is the sign that identifies dealers showing the Eveready Daylo $10,000 Contest Picture. Look for this sign on dealers' windows—

Three Thousand Dollars For Somebody. *YOU?*

THREE thousand dollars in cash for one person; a thousand dollars for another; five hundred for each of three other people and ninety-nine other cash prizes two hundred to ten dollars. *Ten thousand dollars* in all! How much for YOU?

This latest Eveready Daylo Contest will break all contest records. Anyone may enter—it costs nothing; there is no obligation of any kind. Men, women, boys and girls all have equal chances for any of the 104 cash prizes.

On June 1st, Daylo dealers throughout the United States and Canada will display the new Daylo contest Picture in their windows. Go to the store of a Daylo dealer and study the picture. Secure a contest blank, which the dealer will give you, and write on it what you think the letter says. Use 12 words or less. For the best answer that conforms to the contest rules, the winner will receive $3000.00 in cash.

Get an early look at the picture. Submit as many answers as you wish. Contest blanks are free at all Daylo dealers. All answers must be mailed before midnight, August 1st, 1920.

A3114

another EVEREADY contest!
$10,000.00 In Cash Prizes

1 First Prize		$3000.00
1 Second Prize		1000.00
3 Prizes—$500.00	each	1500.00
4 Prizes—$250.00	each	1000.00
5 Prizes—$200.00	each	1000.00
10 Prizes—$100.00	each	1000.00
10 Prizes—$ 50.00	each	500.00
20 Prizes—$ 25.00	each	500.00
50 Prizes—$ 10.00	each	500.00
104 Prizes		Total $10,000.00

Answers will be judged by the editors of "LIFE" and contestants must abide by their judgment.

If two or more contestants submit the identical answer selected by the judges for any prize, the full amount of the prize will be paid to each.

Contest begins June 1, 1920, and ends Midnight, August 1, 1920. Postmarks on letters will determine if letter has been mailed before close of contest.

Answers must contain not more than 12 words. Hyphenated words count as one word.

Complete Contest Rules are printed on Contest Blank. Ask Daylo dealers for them.



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